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New York Scene

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April 15 to May 13, 1989

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29, 1989

David Wojnarowicz, *In The Shadow of Forward Motion*,
P.P.O.W., New York, February 8 to March 4, 1989

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Christopher Lucas, *The Chakra Slide*, 1989.
Mixed media; 78 x 115 x 30 in. Courtesy John Good Gallery

**Christopher Lucas, *Passage*,
John Good Gallery, New York,
April 15 to May 13, 1989 —**

Christopher Lucas marks his rites of *Passage* in this show of elegantly crafted wooden sculptures, paintings and collages. Lucas is a true child of the 60s and 70s counterculture, employing symbols derived from the iconography of Eastern mysticism — Tibetan prayer wheels, mandalas, yogic chakra charts — that had their place in every Haight Ashberry household. But he is, happily, no post-hippie solipsist turned solemn New Ager. If his objects intimate the esoteric and the holy, they do so with a playfulness and decontextualization of sign that also alludes to the practice of formal modernist abstraction: the meeting place of Kundalini and El Lissitzky. Were Lucas the young adept in a yoga ashram, he would be holding a Constructivist paintbrush in one hand and a book of William Burrough's cut-ups in the other.

In previous shows, Lucas exhibited paintings with an inventive, eccentric treatment both of surface and of the painting's relationship to the wall. Constructed of bent, laminated plywood or of sewn fabric mounted in diamond shapes, the paintings were often held off the wall by wooden armatures, or featured wooden reliefs that projected from the picture plane. In

either case, they took on the ambitions of sculpture, striding into a deeper, three dimensional space. In his current exhibition, Lucas turns the corner and presents sculptures that are painted. His wooden conveyances — *Chakra Slide*, *Christmas Sled*, *Sailboat* — give us equal cause for meditation and perambulation. They are vehicles for spiritual and corporeal journeys. Lucas' nostalgia for craft is a passage back in time to the utilitarian outcroppings of a rusticated, pre-plastic society, with its amusement parks, bowling alleys, wooden ships and furniture — the artifacts of incipient, innocent industrialism. His moulded poplar, highly varnished wood constructions are consciously archaic and redolent with archetypal childhood associations: baby furniture, cribs, the school gymnasium. Lucas is mining the soul of our collective unconscious through his illusion to the familiar, homely domestic object, and insisting that even these contain an innate spiritual content. This strategy is clearly in opposition to those contemporary practitioners of commodity art, who use the simulacrum of objects to criticize late capitalist consumption and its effect on an art marketplace denuded of meaning. Their attention starts with the commodity and moves outward, to socio-political



Andrew Masullo, 1729, 1988. Ermine and paper on photograph under glass in wood frame; 23,5 x 18,5 x .75 in. Photo : S. Wells. Courtesy fiction/nonfiction... Collection Ruth Kaufmann, NYC

critique. Lucas maintains the idealized thingness of his material objects, and takes a journey inward to reveal their inviolable kernel of truth.

Lucas' vocabulary of abstract elements mixes remnants of folk art, primitive art, Constructivism and Eastern sacred signs. In *Chakra Slide*, the seven lotuses that are the stations of Kundalini energy are most often represented through a forked figure that variously recalls the Greek Orthodox and Malevitch crosses, and Amish hex signs — all incipient mandala images. But Lucas undercuts this high abstract and/or spiritual epiphany by representing two of the chakras with those furry, idealized versions of animals often found as decals on cribs and other infant furniture. (The child is the father to the man ?) In *Christmas Sled*, an ironic Santa Claus is reduced to primary shaped components — circles for the body and head, a triangle for a superimposed Christmas tree that defines Santa's legs, squares and rectangles completing the delineation — all rendered in a palette of red, white and black. Here, the familiar cultural icon is incorporated into the modernist rubric of geometric abstraction. And in *Sailboat*, the exterior hull is treated with a wavy black design that recalls Northwest Coast Indian art (the Kwakiutl whale ?), while the vessel's interior is marked by a series of circles that seem poised for navigation into psychic areas.

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**Andrew Masullo, fiction/nonfiction, New York,
April 6 to April 29, 1989 —**

Like Christopher Lucas, Andrew Masullo is obsessed by the passage of time, the sacredness of the object and its internal journey through the collective unconscious of the artist and his audience. Masullo is a master scavenger of the detritus of human existence. In the over 200 small works that comprise his fifth solo

exhibition, he again proves that he can create art out of anything : found photographs, scraps of wood, fur, fabric, remnants of secondhand oil paintings, marbles, old book covers, a bit of found text.

The preciousness of his objects is heightened by their small scale, and his usual medium, collage mounted under glass in a wooden frame, linking Masullo's box-like constructions with the work of American mystic Joseph Cornell. Like Cornell, Masullo's work is psychologically charged with the transitory nature of human existence, the existential dilemma of time as the great eraser of memory and effort. These are works that suffer the emotional torment of their ephemerality, small pieces that deal with the big issues — life, death, love, negation, absurdity. The danger of such personal revelation is that individual works are often unintelligible to the spectator, hidden behind Masullo's diaristic obsessions and onanistic self absorption. But the cumulative effect of this exhibition is undeniably mesmerizing, provocative and disturbing, inserting us into a circumscribed past from which there is no immediate relief, no notion of historical progress or paradise regained. Masullo is by no means mawkishly attached to his suffering, nor naive to the point of existential caricature. What he offers us are the external souvenirs of his internal psychic survival.

Most of the work is untitled, but like California artist Jonathan Borofsky, Masullo is an obsessive counter, and each work is marked by an inventory number. (Like the coming millenium, Masullo is approaching number 2 000 in his oeuvre). Many of the works also count internally, with painted or collaged numerals and words enclosing the content of the piece. 1855, for example, consists of a black and white found photo of a woman's legs, in shoes and stockings, highlighted against a dark, draped background, with the words "one", "two", "three" and "four" collaged onto the four corners. 1801 consists of the numbers one through nine, written in black oil paint on a piece of red, seamed fabric, with the numeral "1801" and the artist's name appearing, respectively, on the lower left and right corners.

Often the connotation of death is fairly direct. In 1981, a discarded oil portrait of a young man with closed eyes and a downward tilt to his head is augmented by a series of parallel white lines drawn over his face. The text of sadness and negation is accentuated by the solemn greens of the found portrait and its somewhat distressed surface, as well as the vertical lines in his striped shirt, which together with the added white horizontals, give a sense of closure and entrapment. So too in 1939, a black and white photo of 50s Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, with the text "JUL '65", the month and year of his death, scrawled over.

Even when his texts remain ambiguous and

hermetic, Masullo can intrude an incongruous, gallows humor into the work. Take *1746*, a posed black and white photo of three schoolboys and their riding master staring resolutely into the camera, each labelled with a collaged number, "one" through "four", seemingly tagged on to their trouser or jacket buttons, transforming them into specimens. Or *1729*, the photo of an architectural model of an apartment building, collaged with a grid of paper cutouts of leaf and flower forms, or squares of ermine fur. In each case, our conventional attitude to the purposes of the original photo is being challenged. Jogging our perceptions, Masullo reminds us that all indeed is vanity against the measure of time, that schoolboys will reside on mortuary slabs and tall buildings will fall, leaving wildlife in their wake.

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David Wojnarowicz,
In The Shadow of Forward Motion,
P.P.O.W., New York,
February 5 to March 4, 1989 —

Subtlety has never characterized David Wojnarowicz. Since he surfaced during the salad days of the East Village, in the early 80s, his paintings, photographs, sculptures, collages, film work and writing have defined an active, street smart, politically aware persona. Part of his myth is his urgency to communicate, to delineate the plight of the disenfranchised, the inequities of late capitalism, the holes in the fabric of the American dream. *In The Shadow of Forward Motion* carries his didactic, agit-prop, graphically bold work one step further. The central metaphor of the title portrays society as a locomotive, hurtling mindlessly ahead at full throttle towards some uncertain if not cataclysmic future, while casting into the shadows those marginalia who are deemed undeserving of the great lurch forward. Although this is not a show "about" AIDS, the homeless, or those oppressed because of their sexual preferences, these potent political issues receive strong articulation in Wojnarowicz's dense, emotional texts and inflammatory images. The artist recognizes that our current health care crisis has sharpened class distinctions, and that one's anger, fear, frustration and sorrow over official inaction and duplicity cannot be understood without first bringing the inequities and disjunctions of the entire System into high relief.

In the title piece of the show, we see a factory belching smoke, and a frog with its belly torn away to reveal machined gears, both surrounded by scores of spermatozoa against a white field. The image is one of spiraling decay. As Wojnarowicz notes in a catalogue entry¹: "Using gears or machines as symbols is important to me because in the early part of the century the Futurists thought that the machine was God. They



David Wojnarowicz, *Towards the Re-design of the Dollar Bill*, 1988-89. Collage, spray paint, ink, string, 12 b/w photographs on masonite; 46.5 x 67 in. Photo: A. Reich. Courtesy P.P.O.W.

placed all their hopes and the hope of civilization on the machine. They thought the machine would liberate people from the slavery of unnecessary labor and leave them free to truly live their lives. Take a walk along any river in any country and you can see that the machine is almost defunct; God is rusting away leaving a fragile shell — factories — like the shell of an insect that has metamorphosed into an entirely different creature and flown away."

Throughout the exhibition are images of frogs, snakes and ants in the process of being devoured or dismembered, evidence of the brutality of survival in an embattled age. Wojnarowicz also returns to several strategies from previous work, notably the papering of objects and tableaux with collages of colored maps or dollar bills. In a piece that is perhaps the emotional center of the exhibition, *Untitled*, a backdrop of currency supports a text, written by Wojnarowicz, decrying with horror and rage the homophobic response to AIDS. Sperm shapes, cut out from map paper, swim around the margin of the piece, listing other towns and cities where the virus might spread. In the center are nine photographs of the face, feet and hands of photographer Peter Hujar, a friend of Wojnarowicz who recently succumbed to the disease. These deathbed photographs are a physical act of mourning. They are muted, respectful and full of sorrow, but, mounted on a field of US dollars, are not allowed to escape their political context. Combined with Wojnarowicz's first person, confessional text, which begins in a measured, accusative tone and ends in a fierce, sputtering rage, the act of mourning is transformed into an inflammatory call for revenge.

Another currency piece, *Towards the Re-design of the Dollar Bill*, superimposes a hand holding a snake and various images of houses and pharmaceuticals over a field of dollar bills, attempting to release, through the miracle of incantation, the Federal funding needed to help the homeless and the sick. If art does have the power to change lives, then let us hope that Wojnarowicz can perform this snake trick.

Steven Kaplan

NOTE

1. Taken from the xeroxed catalogue, *David Wojnarowicz: In The Shadow of Forward Motion*, 1989, P.P.O.W. Gallery