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Arts

ART REVIEW; Uptown, Too, Has Heat and Light Aplenty

By HOLLAND COTTER

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JUST before and after World War II, 57th Street in Manhattan was the Gold Coast of modern art. Bright lights, big pictures, names like Pollock, de Kooning and Kline, not to mention indoor smoking.

When the action started moving downtown in the 1960's, the Midtown luster dimmed a bit. But it never went out, and today the area has a mellow, steady glow. Its prewar galleries look shapely and civilized next to Chelsea barns. Some of the city's best noncommercial spaces are in the area. So are some of this spring's more interesting shows.

Organizing a tour by medium or style doesn't do the trick. There's too much and too little of everything. So how about a theme? Light. Basically, light is what art is made of. Color is light rays bent a certain way. Sculpture is shaped by light. Photography? Light plus chemicals. Film: projected light. That's the physical part. Then there are ideas. Some of us, sometimes, find art to be illuminating: it fires the emotions, throws history into relief, brightens the day.

Art-and-light talk can get out of hand. Unless you are careful, you find yourself veering toward the Sublime, or some such place, and there the population changes. Suddenly spirits, space cadets and visionaries are walking around like so many turned-on light bulbs. Well, Pollock was one of those, so that's not so bad. So was Kline, which is better. And it turns out there are more where they came from on 57th Street and its environs this spring, as you'll see.

"Josef Albers: Homage to Color" at PaceWildenstein is a cool thing: a perfectly unecstatic demonstration of how luminous color can be. Albers (1888-1976) was a well-known abstract painter and maker of stained glass. He was also a born pedagogue, who combined the analytical acuity of a biochemist and the devotional patience of a priest.

Paintings like the 30 at PaceWildenstein were elements in a long-term research project to determine, through art, all the possible implications of a single word: vision.

In one sense, there isn't much to the work: color, a few geometric forms, that's it. And you can watch him work. With color, he starts simply. He paints a square of yellow on a canvas. Then he adds a touch of, say, red to the original yellow and lays a square of a new orangey-yellow on the earlier one, nested-box style. Then he adds green or something and gets a funny brown, which goes on top of the other two.

So now you have brown on orange on yellow. Or beeswax on egg yolk on forsythia. Or circumspection on passion on innocence. And by the time you've come this far, the stacked-up planes of color are moving slightly, like the bellows of a harmonium.

I suspect this is the kind of experience Albers wanted to put us through with his color studies, and it was one that he, the good teacher, took himself through first, adjusting colors, monitoring their temperatures and temperaments, taking notes. Some people find such exercises dry and mechanical. I can see why, but they don't strike me that way, nor do they look that way in the show.

Albers got the idea for color series from seeing vibrantly painted house facades in Mexico. And the installation at PaceWildenstein actually suggests a room with walls pierced by deep-set windows or empty

niches for holding lamps. In Albers's world, though, the empty niches are lamps, glowing with color. Call it Lutheran Zen.

Amy Myers

Albers was, of course, the product of a high Modernist utopian time, which is unrecoverable now, and just as well. But his merging of art, science and spiritual discipline has produced contemporary heirs. Among them is Amy Myers, who makes an impressive New York solo debut at Danese with a show titled "String Series: The Handheld Universe."

Ms. Myers's work in no way resembles Albers's. His small paintings are geometric and emptied out; her large drawings are organic, diagrammatic, packed with detail. But her art, like his, is both system-based and personal. Albers's foundation was optics; Ms. Myers's is physics, and its laws of endless change and recombination. She learned those laws at home, as a child, from her father, a particle physicist whose experiments she observed.

What she has come up with for herself is an art that is both hard labor and serious play. The single, big, complicated structure in each of her drawings is made of countless small draftsmanly parts, meticulously arranged. The symmetry is breathtaking, as are the spark-shooting forms that result. They suggest many concrete things -- spaceships, ectoplasmic apparitions, sexual organs, mandalas -- but remain emanations of the personal physics that generated them.

Sharon Ellis

The quartet of paintings titled "The Four Elements," by Sharon Ellis, at Artemis Greenberg Van Doren also feel driven, but in a less tension-inducing way. They are landscapes, so the language is concrete and familiar. Some of her influences are easy to see, from Romantics like Caspar David Friedrich to American Modernists like Charles Burchfield and Agnes Pelton. Finally, her technique is so obviously virtuosic that it holds no surprises. It's like sugar coating.

Ms. Ellis means these paintings to be expressive and exciting, though, and at least one of them, "Fire," is. On the surface it is an autumn scene, but with a wired, hallucinatory verve. The sky is burning; the trees are calcified from heat. Something apocalyptic is going on, a fire-and-brimstone "Fantasia."

"Air" has strange trees, too, but they are set against a rainbowish sky, with giant gold spores zooming around like rockets. It's a pleasing picture, but too pretty, like a Claritin ad. This is a risk Ms. Ellis's paintings run. She prefers not to have her art described as psychedelic, but the trippier they are, the better. This was true of Burchfield and Pelton, too. The gallery has a painting by each. We don't often see much Pelton, but she's really good, and her organic abstraction here is gorgeously hallucinogenic, the real unearthly thing.

Mariko Mori

The Japanese artist Mariko Mori has produced her own unearthly realness for more than a decade, with work that blends science fiction, fashion and esoteric Buddhism. Of late, she has been designing interactive spiritual hardware. At the Brooklyn Museum of Art, she installed a meditation booth that channeled solar light. Now a long-planned and more ambitious piece titled "Wave U.F.O." has landed, courtesy of the Public Art Fund, in the atrium of the former I.B.M. building on Madison Avenue between 56th and 57th Streets.

Shaped like a huge drop of pearlescent fluid, it accommodates three electrode-wired participants at a time, who are treated to a son-et-lumière projection of their brain waves, followed by an eye-rinsing aurora borealis of Ms. Mori's devising. The work is high-tech, fun while it lasts, and must have cost someone a fortune to produce. Sounds like art to me.

'Early Buddhist Sculpture'

Those craving more by Ms. Mori can head to SoHo, where she has a sculpture of touch-response aliens -- they light up when hugged -- at Deitch Projects (18 Wooster Street, through June 14). Others may prefer to move on to the Fuller Building for a celestial show of early Buddhist Indian sculpture at Carlton Rochell. The star is a life-size figure of a standing Buddha, now headless, dating to the second century A.D. Heroically sensual in his clinging robe, he was cut from a red sandstone that still seems warm with the Indian sun.

Next to him is a bust of a bodhisattva who has lightning bolts for hair, and nearby is a fabulous carving of Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of music and wisdom, surrounded by animal-headed attendants. In the West, you have to go to heaven to meet your Maker. In India, the gods spend long weekends on earth.

'Heaven and Hell'

One floor below, Barbara Mathes has a group show worth a peek. Its title is "Heaven and Hell," and as usual in this Miltonian face-off, the Devil makes a strong impression, particularly in a pair of uncharacteristically interesting sculptures by Stephan Baklenhol. As to heaven, there is Thomas Ruff's photograph of a star-filled sky and Thomas Struth's "Paradise 16, Yakushima, Japan," a view of sunlight falling on a mist-filled mountain valley and turning a river to gold.

'The New World's Old World'

Light falling on landscape is the visual crux of "The New World's Old World: Photographic Views of Ancient America" at AXA Gallery, a documentary show that is also a sustained meditation on the shadow play of science, art and politics.

Organized by May Castleberry, the show includes epically cinematic pictures of the American West by Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, men who must have lived in a state of nonstop awe. Less often seen are images taken in Central and South America by Europeans like Claude Joseph Désiré Charnay, Osbert Salvin and Augustus Le Plongeon.

Le Plongeon, it seems, was fixated on the theory that the Maya were the civilization from which all others sprang. To prove it, he climbed mountains, slashed through jungles, dug up ruins and took pictures like mad. His contemporaries dismissed him as a crackpot, but you can see what kept him going. The pre-Columbian remains he encountered are like the spacecraft of a superhuman race. In addition to being an archaeological tool, photography in the Americas was used to create national identity, and as an art medium. In the 1940's, the great Peruvian photographer Martín Chambi presented Machu Picchu as a visionary monument to the past, his country's and his own. In 1930's snapshots of Mexican ruins by Albers and in aerial shots of Peru by George Johnson, the New World becomes a geometric design for modernist delectation.

More recently, artists like Leandro Katz have focused on the politics of picture-making. Others have gone a transcendentalist route, as Edward Ranney does in his photographs of the mysterious "Nazca lines," manmade linear patterns of raised earth that crisscross Peru. No one knows what they mean, but some people like the theory that they were designed as directional charts for intergalactic travelers cruising Earth in search of a future home.

'Homeland'

Prospective settlers might think twice after visiting "Homeland," a group exhibition about current American politics at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The curators -- Craig Buckley, Tanya Leighton, Sara Reisman, Emily Rothschild and Nat Trotman -- are fellows in this year's Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program. They are clearly able to look at art and think about life at the same time, by no means a common talent in the art world. And they have come up with a shrewdly entertaining show.

The inclusion of work from the 1980's and 90's by Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds and Hans Haacke acknowledges a history of activist Conceptualism, but much else is new. Security is a matter of interest. The group Institute for Applied Autonomy has a Web project in the show, begun in 2001, that maps out paths through Manhattan that avoid surveillance cameras. Arnold Mesches includes an excerpt from his "F.B.I. File Series" (2000-2001), an autobiographical documentary record of decades of government harassment. The full series appeared at P.S. 1 last year. It should be in a museum. It is the equivalent of history painting.

Olav Westphalen's "Statue" (2003), with a standing-tall figure of a man in a business suit, looks like a commemorative sculpture. Only if you walk around the piece do you see that the man is wearing handcuffs; in fact, he represents an unlucky Enron executive. Someday "Statue" may find an official site. A performance piece by Michael Rakowitz titled "Minaret" has already been seen in several sites, officially or not. To execute the work, the artist goes to the roofs of various public buildings equipped with a megaphone and an alarm clock shaped like a mosque. The alarm itself is a recording of the call to prayer chanted five times a day from minarets across the Islamic world. Using the megaphone, Mr. Rakowitz amplifies the alarm, sending its ardent message out over American cities. For most people, the voice is just one more piece of the aural mix; to others it is a political or spiritual wake-up call; to still others, it is the sound of home, wherever or whatever home may be.

Dario Robleto

"Dario Robleto: Say Goodbye to Substance," at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, is also about America and is also political, sort of. It deals in inquiry rather than in opinion, questions rather than answers. It approaches cultural history as a kind of high school science fair project, but one of such staggering speculative ingenuity and moral precocity that any teacher might think it is a joke, which it partly is. Me? I'd give it a blue ribbon and a Nobel Prize, and send Mr. Robleto -- who is 31, lives in San Antonio, Tex., and is making his New York solo debut -- to Washington to live in the White House, run the Pentagon, be First Lady, whatever he wanted to do.

Organized by Shamim M. Momin, director of this Whitney branch, the show is built round a 10-part sculpture titled "Popular Hymns Will Sustain Us All (End It All)," which is an index of the artist's methods and means. Each section takes the form of a boxlike compartment holding minisculptures, which Mr. Robleto made mostly by hand from some of the following ingredients: plaster, spray paint, driftwood, homemade crystals, antibiotics, prehistoric whalebone dust, gunpowder and melted vinyl recordings of the Beatles, Black Sabbath and Tammy Wynette. The whole piece lights up and blinks a lot, as if it were about to lift off.

It's almost impossible to give a thumbnail sense of what's going on. Suffice it to say that utopian thinking, science, nature, pop culture and an American childhood are in the conceptual mix. They are all treated with an attitude of sunny despair, nicely distilled in "I Won't Let You Say Goodbye This Time" (2001-2003), a photographic work for which Mr. Robleto raised tomato plants rescued from a satellite capsule that was launched into orbit by one ill-fated space shuttle, the Challenger, and retrieved by another, the Columbia.

'Aftershock'

That Mr. Robleto painstakingly handmade his art would probably disqualify it for inclusion in "Aftershock: The Legacy of the Ready-Made in Postwar and Contemporary American Art," a neo-Dada survey at Dickinson Roundell, though his crypto-anarchic sensibility makes sense here. Marcel Duchamp, of course, presides. The ready-made was his baby: "I took it out of the earth, and onto the planet of aesthetics," he said, as quoted in a catalog by Francis M. Naumann, the art historian and art dealer, who organized the show.

Even after a long, reputation-snuffing stretch of postmodern sainthood, Duchamp remains a live wire, and the exhibition highlights a sampling of the American artists he inspired. There are a lot of them here, old and young, some represented by classic pieces that retain charisma even in a desperately overcrowded installation. It's great, for example, to see a 1958 pencil study by Jasper Johns for his sculpture "Flashlight,"

a scruffy 1961 Robert Rauschenberg assemblage and Bruce Nauman's snapshot of a rough-and-ready drill-bit sculpture.

The Dada-derived work of the 1980's went for polish over funk, and nothing here is more polished than Sherrie Levine's 1991 "Fountain (After Marcel Duchamp)," a urinal cast in high-gloss bronze. For some reason, Ms. Levine has come in for critical sniping. But in the 1980's she walked straight out to the end of the Duchampian limb and started sawing away with a cool aplomb that made everyone else seem clownish. Her Paula Cooper show last month looked good; so does "Fountain," beaming out of its corner like a refulgent mother ship.

'Puerto Rican Light'

Traveling light is the idea behind "Puerto Rican Light: Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla" at the Americas Society, a show that presents the work of two conceptual artist-collaborators who divide their time between Puerto Rico and New York. At first, the show seems barely there. The main gallery appears completely empty, except that its walls are bathed in changing red, green and yellow light. Certain artists have taught us to think of light as sculpture. Dan Flavin was one, and, sure enough, a 1965 Flavin piece, made of three vertical lighted tubes -- red, pink, yellow -- is installed in a smaller gallery. It is titled "Puerto Rican Light (to Jeanie Blake)."

Usually a Flavin piece just plugs in to the wall. This one, though, is powered by solar energy stored in batteries sitting in a shipping crate in the middle of the room. The energy, enough to keep the Flavin lighted for the duration of the show, was gathered in San Juan. So, it turns out, was the light in the larger gallery. Indeed, the rhythmic change of color is timed to correspond to a set of traffic lights on a San Juan street corner.

The show, organized by Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, associate curator at the gallery, is rounded out by a panoramic photograph of a man standing on a shoreline and facing out toward a distant city -- San Juan again, though it could easily be part of New Jersey seen from Manhattan -- as a column of platinum sunlight falls across the water to his feet. The light appears substantial enough for him to walk across it to the distant town, or, in yet another play on the idea of transport in a magical show, into the clouds above.

Rafael Tufiño

Then, once you're touched by Caribbean light and a traveling mood, I recommend a visit to El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem, where "Painter of the People," a retrospective of work by the Puerto Rican artist Rafael Tufiño, is on view. Mr. Tufiño, 73, was actually born in Brooklyn and moved to Puerto Rico as a child. He has been back and forth countless times, and in the 1970's helped create the workshop called El Taller Boricua, still vital and located a few blocks east of El Museo.

With such links, it makes perfect sense that the survey -- organized by Dr. Teresa Tío for the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico in San Juan -- should be in New York, where this artist's history began. His career covers six decades; the show documents much of it. From the outset Mr. Tufiño was a figurative artist, and Puerto Rico -- its people, cities and landscapes -- was his subject, in paintings, prints and posters that joined Fauvist colors and Expressionist forms.

Piece by piece, there is much to savor in the show. But sometimes an artist's career can be a radiant thing in itself, a source of shared energy, and this is true of Mr. Tufiño's. His cosmopolitan presence in Puerto Rico and New York has encouraged generations of artists prone to view themselves as confined to a backwater to feel part of a larger world, and to feel that the world they live in is larger than they know. Even the crop of very young Puerto Rico-based artists, who are just beginning to cause ripples internationally, owe him a debt of gratitude.

Their work is, of course, nothing like his. Even in the 1950's, his was a traditionalist version of Modernism, one that avoided the abstraction that still hung on as the progressive house style of 57th Street. Instead, he painted his life, more or less as he saw it. A tough, realist portrait of his mother from 1953 is well known, though my own favorites are his seductive architectural interiors. One is of a cool, dim theater, its curtains

draped like sheets hung up to dry; another is of a San Juan bar as solemn as a church off hours. Best of all is a recent painting set in a dark room but looking out toward a sun-flooded balcony, and beyond that a wall with a fantastic floating patchwork of squares, bright yellow and red: the colors of Albers's homages, and of "Puerto Rican Light."

The Hot Spots

The exhibitions reviewed by Holland Cotter:

"JOSEF ALBERS: HOMAGE TO COLOR," PaceWildenstein, 32 East 57th Street, (212) 421-3292.

Through June 14.

"AMY MYERS: STRING SERIES, THE HANDHELD UNIVERSE," Danese, 41 East 57th Street, (212) 223-2227. Through June 27.

"SHARON ELLIS: THE FOUR ELEMENTS," Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, 730 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street, (212) 445-0444. Through June 27.

"MARIKO MORI: WAVE U.F.O.," presented by the Public Art Fund in the atrium of 590 Madison Avenue, at 56th Street, (212) 980-4575. Through July 31. Hours: Tuesdays, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Wednesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Sundays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"EARLY BUDDHIST SCULPTURE," Carlton Rochell, 41 East 57th Street, (212) 759-7600. Through June 30.

"HEAVEN AND HELL," Barbara Mathes Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, (212) 752-5135. Through June 6.

"THE NEW WORLD'S OLD WORLD: PHOTOGRAPHIC VIEWS OF ANCIENT AMERICA," AXA Gallery, 787 Seventh Avenue, at 51st Street, (212) 554-4818. Through July 19.

"HOMELAND," presented by the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program at the Art Gallery of the Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, at 34th Street, (212) 431-1737. Through June 29. Hours: Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 6 p.m.

"DARIO ROBLETTO: SAY GOODBYE TO SUBSTANCE," Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, 120 Park Avenue, at 42nd Street, (917) 663-2453. Through July 3. Hours: Mondays through Fridays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 7:30 p.m.

"AFTERSHOCK: THE LEGACY OF THE READY-MADE IN POSTWAR AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ART," Dickinson Roundell, 19 East 66th Street, (212) 772-8083. Through June 20.

"PUERTO RICAN LIGHT: JENNIFER ALLORA AND GUILLERMO CALZADILLA," Americas Society Gallery, 680 Park Avenue, at 68th Street, (212) 249-8950. Through July 20.

"RAFAEL TUFIÑO: PAINTER OF THE PEOPLE," El Museo del Barrio, 1230 Fifth Avenue, at 104th Street, East Harlem, (212) 831-7272. Through Aug. 24.