

Michael Steinberg

A selection of young New York painters extravagantly engaged with the physical and suggestive properties of their medium.

# A New York mosaic



Sean Mellyn, *Karen Taylor*, 1996, oil on canvas, plastic flowers, 121.2 x 91.4 x 5.1 cm

David Dinkins, the previous mayor of New York City, referred to the patchwork of variegated ethnic communities which abut each other throughout the boroughs as a 'glittering mosaic'. Inherent in that description is a perception of multitudes of cultures and traditions which sometimes commingle, sometimes conflict and sometimes interact. This portrait of disparate pieces, which retain individual identities while remaining parts of a whole, is easily transferred to the New York painting scene. A generation of painters too young to have been conscious of early '70s pronouncements of painting's demise continue to demonstrate the viability of the medium with an enormous range of expression. Variety, innovation, invention and exuberance are all qualities readily found. Dozens of small currents and tendencies co-exist and occasionally intertwine. This drive-by survey of some personal favourites only hints at the abundance of painting being made and shown, and leaves me guiltily aware of what has been

left out. But it may also help to illuminate some of the reasons for painting's persistence, and help us consider what need or desire painting meets. Even the most cursory examination of the New York scene impels the conclusion that it must provide something.

One strong 'school' of painters who emerged over the last few seasons might be classified under the heading 'neo-pop'. Julia Jacquette, who is discussed elsewhere in this issue, is one of these. Another is Sean Mellyn. Mellyn's 1996 show at Anna Kustera Gallery was dominated by large-scale heads of children, icily silhouetted on pink and blue grounds. Using a palette seemingly derived from 1950s appliances, the paintings take on an almost scientific perfectionism which subtly mocks the illusion of happy, carefree children, and substitutes a *Midwytch Cuckoos* sort of terror. One characteristic which seems to distinguish Mellyn and Jacquette from earlier pop painters is the use of a more personalised, familial and emotional imagery.

Even though many of Mellyn's faces in fact come from advertising, they are transformed into portraits eerily close to our dysfunctional homes. His next solo show opens at Anna Kustera in late March of this year.

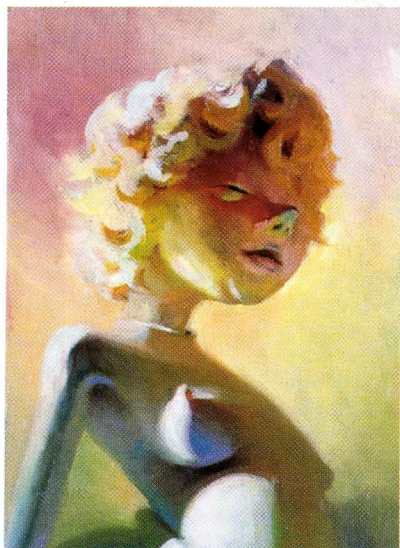
Another tendency draws on a very rich vein of sentimentality and near kitsch while delivering highly provocative, disturbing and suggestive imagery. Margaret Curtis and Lisa Yuskavage are two artists whose paintings simultaneously seduce and threaten. Curtis's most recent solo show at PPOW was entitled 'Kuntry Matters'. Paintings which at a distance seem innocent, almost pastoral, reveal on closer examination complex incongruities of scale and iconography. The viewer is slowly drawn into the work, and then knocked around. The thickness of the paint itself, which in some instances is squeezed directly onto the canvas, creates an almost squeamish physical sensation. Images quaintly painted with almost the sweetness of children's book illustrations are quietly subverted by subtly drawn figures. An Easter-candy bluebird hovers like a bird of prey over a nude woman lying on her belly. Enormous emotional tension is generated by powerful contradictions of style and content.

The work of Lisa Yuskavage, more overtly sexual and in-your-face than that of Margaret Curtis, employs an almost sickeningly sweet palette of 'girlish' colours to render horrific images of grotesquely distorted women. Huge breasts, distended behinds, cloyingly cute faces, all rendered in luminous pastel tones, attract and repel in the same moment. Yuskavage's paintings invoke the same sense



Margaret Curtis, *Bush*, 1996, oil on linen, 35.5 x 40.6 cm





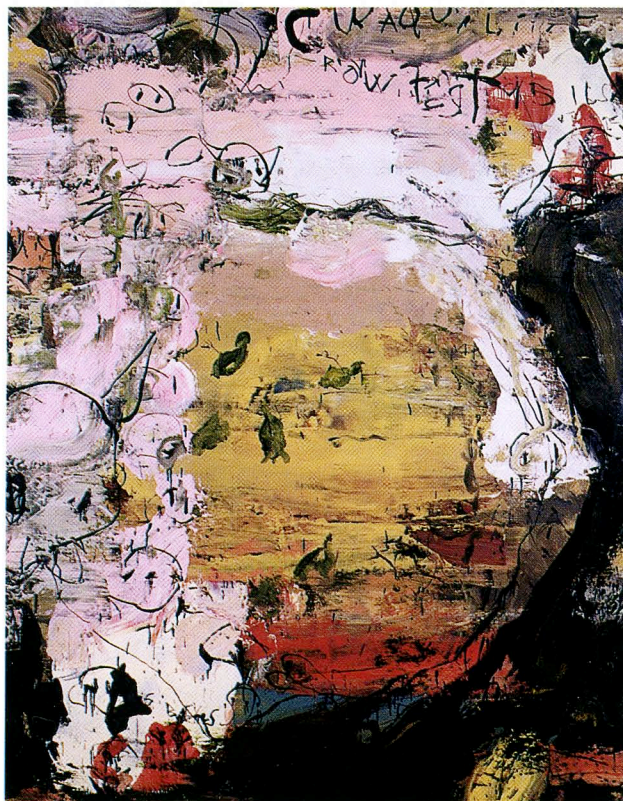
Lisa Yuskavage, *The Food eater*, 1996,  
oil on canvas board, 20.3 x 15.2 cm

of shame we experience when we are caught staring at someone actually disfigured, and yet the paintings demand to be stared at. Much of the iconography in the work refers to personal hygiene and manners. Titles reinforce the message – *Motherfucking Foodeating*, *Foodeating Hardplace* and *Motherfucking Rock* are recent examples. Some critics find Yuskavage's work rife with self-hatred, but the compelling beauty with which they are painted adds a paradoxical twist to any possible interpretation.

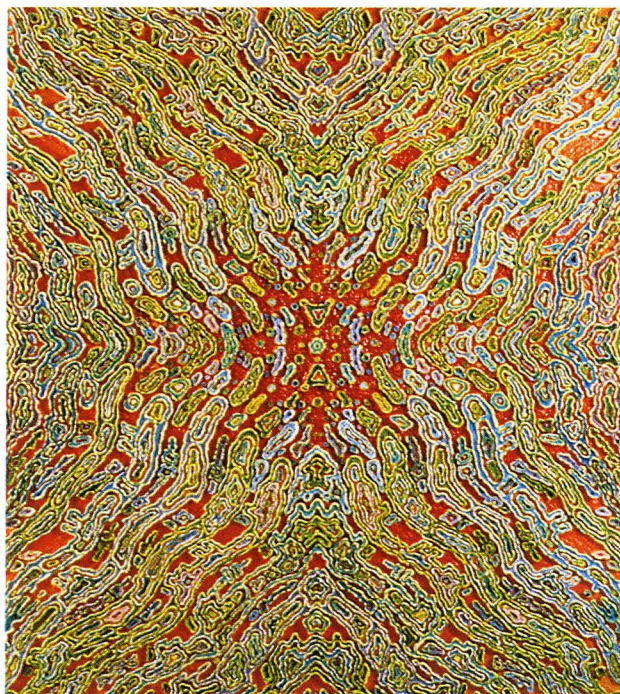
Two painters, Bruce Pearson and Brad Kahlhammer, could easily be mistaken for abstractionists working in distinct traditions. But both bodies of work are infused with elements which allow them to escape simple classification. In Pearson's paintings, acrylic on carved styrofoam, the viewer is confronted by a highly-coloured, deeply-carved surface of psychedelic intensity. The nearly organic forms suggest both cellular life forms and geologic patterns, but the hint of a text or script slowly emerges. With patient study, letters begin to appear, frequently from the 'negative' space between the forms, and the thought of an underlying text teases the viewer. In fact, Pearson begins with a random appropriation of language – a sentence from a television show, a newspaper headline – and gradually embeds the letters and words in the pattern of the painting. There is a sense of generation from text, a reification of logos – in the beginning was the word.

Brad Kahlhammer's work has some of the brushy vitality and looseness of action painting, and mixes in words and childlike drawing. A narrative can be projected into the paintings. Rebus-like icons become associated with the scrawled text, which then reads like a title. The painting is taken as a whole, or broken down into cartoon-like segments as the viewer attempts to follow a possible story-line. The brush-marks begin to function as a landscape, a setting in which something may be taking place. In spite of the near violence with which the surface is attacked, there is profoundly nostalgic, yet positive, feeling to the work, a quality of searching and yearning for some other time in some other place.

The artists discussed here represent a tiny



Brad Kahlhammer,  
*Crow Fest*, 1997,  
oil on canvas, 188 x 162.5 cm



Bruce Pearson, *Wanna Be Happy – Be Happy*, 1996,  
oil & acrylic on styrofoam,  
20.3 x 15.2 cm

sample of work going on in New York at the moment – merely five tiles in the 'glittering mosaic'. Every one of them is totally distinct from each of the others. Yet they manifest common qualities of immediacy, authenticity and directness which are sometimes, not always, lost in more technologically-driven forms. Painting provides the artist with an unalienated means of production, and the viewer the feeling of unmediated experience. Both these things are increasingly rare in our ever more electronic and digitised world. This is not to suggest that painting is in some way morally superior, only that it seems to provide something (a human immediacy?) that we still want.

Bruce Pearson's work is included in 'Wild', until 29 March, and he is one of four artists in 'Project 63', both in the Project Space at The Museum of Modern Art.

Sean Mellyn, 'Cold Storage', 27 March–2 May, Anna Kustera Gallery, New York.

Brad Kahlhammer, 'KTNN', 25 April–6 June, Bronwyn Keenan, New York.

Margaret Curtis shows at PPOW.

Julia Jacquette's work can be seen at La Mama Gallery.

Lisa Yuskavage has a show at Marianna Boesky Gallery in October.