



CRITIC VIEW: Spring Harvest at 2015 Art Hamptons

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by James Croak

Now comes the season when spring planting throws green shoots above the compost and manure that was tilled into the arid soil after winter, the green fuse shoves upward through the mulch and detritus bringing new life and nutrition.

But also come the weeds, foul tasting pretenders to our salad, party crashers that crowd out the light, sop up nutrients, and imitate the food for our soul.

Most art fairs are an overgrown and untended garden; finding fruit among the thick weeds takes some searching and reflecting. These are not the best venue for art viewing but are now the de facto way to assess the current scene; one-stop shopping has displaced the white box gallery show as the primary mercantile exchange. ArtHamptons opened on Thursday, July 2, on Lumber Lane in Bridgehampton with more than 2,800 viewers and lengthy traffic jams. It is the first of three separate Southampton art fairs that will occupy our attention on the East End during July.

One group of works seen on the opening night and ready for harvest are the staged photographs of Lottie Davies, presented by the Cynthia Corbett Gallery of London. They are a continuation of a genre begun by Jeffrey Wall, 20 years her senior, and others, which uses involved and expensively produced images requiring sets and actors similar to film, except then handsomely shot as a still image.

Davies's photographs are made to appear casual but the smooth lighting generally gives them away as planned rather than observed by chance. Shooting on 4X5 large format film, she has mastered this genre, often layering her images, which explains the tremendous color saturation. She puts her philosophy degree to good use with great wit and it is fun to tease apart the semiotic layers inherent in her images.



“Blue Bedroom” by Lottie Davies, 2008. Fr. ‘Memories and Nightmares.’

“The Blue Bedroom” on view at ArtHamptons reads like a scene from the “Mad Men” series sans dialog or motion. Even so, one can stare at this single image for hours trying to resolve it. Here is a perfectly kept house with a couple readying for a night out on the town, the youngster in the corner

takes it all in with a look of healthy curiosity. Mom and dad are dressed confidently and the room reads as upper middle class. And a class act is Ms. Davies.

Another group of staged photographs are compelling underwater shots by Howard Schatz. Mr. Schatz was an M.D. and packed it in to work in fine art photography. I've seen this before—many times actually: surgeons becoming artists, or litigators or other professionals becoming artists. Very few are able to transfer whatever talent they had in other areas to fine art and often one almost feels sorry for their efforts.

Not so with Dr. Shatz (I wonder if he minds critics using "Dr."; it gets confusing) whose underwater fashion shots are beautifully staged and resplendently shot, as good as or better than any underwater shots I've seen. His entry here, entitled *The Corps de Ballet*, features 16 svelte girls in an underwater coordinated dance.

Schatz's colors, arrangement, and craft are perfectly rendered, and the difficulty in arranging such a shot should not go unnoticed. With its depth and uncanny beauty this photograph is a keeper for sure.



"The Corps de Ballet" by Howard Schatz. Exhibited with Gallery M, Denver.

I give points for being full-on bonkers and this year Bruce Makowsky scooped the prize by a wide margin.

To appreciate the work, remember that one of the most poignant lines in film was spoken by Paul Dooley in the masterpiece "Breaking Away." Dooley plays a stone mason turned used car dealer and in explaining his life to his son he says, "We built these buildings and then it's like they become too good for us." Indeed, construction workers build our buildings with immense skill and risk, but soon class structure sets in and they are expected to finish the interiors via the service entrance. They are not good enough to walk upon the marble lobby that they built.



"Hermes wall saw" by Bruce Makowsky.

Makowsky flips this notion on its head by reissuing construction tools as high quality luxury goods with ersatz labels and gold fittings, making builders the luxury consumers. There is the Coco Chanel jack hammer, a Hermes masonry wall saw, and a Coco Chanel nail gun. Each is rebuilt and cast with brass and gold fittings; they not only appear to be luxury goods, they actually are luxury goods.

One curious caveat is that, with the exception of the ubiquitous jack hammer, only construction workers would know what these tools are. This is a strong body of work brought to the fair by Axiom Contemporary of Santa Monica, CA.



“Coco Chanel jackhammer” by Bruce Makowsky.



“Coco Chanel framing nail gun” by Bruce Makowsky.

It is hard to find much juice in abstract expressionist art anymore; it is a thrice exhausted area and generally considered too easy to create to raise much enthusiasm. Nonetheless there are a few second generation AE painters still about. At 89 Ed Moses is working and ascendant once again, and in at ArtHamptons there are several remarkable works created recently by the 85-year-old Hector Leonardi, who has been working for decades as this genre went in and out of style. These are involving and beautiful works, giving us a connection to this mid-20th century passion.



“Untitled” by Hector Leonardi, 2015.

A third octogenarian still painting is Margaret Keane, who at 88 has become an improbable art world investment, a feminist star, and subject of a feature film. The creator of the “big eyed waifs” kitsch that cluttered tourist stores in the 1960s, she had her early career stolen from her by her plagiarist husband, Walter Keane, who claimed that he was the creator of the works. Margaret was shy by nature and believed the only reason her work was profitable for them both was because the public thought a man was creating it. For a decade she painted secretly in a locked room and Walter was the man about town enjoying the money and social cachet of a successful artist, albeit one shunned by critical circles.

Tim Burton’s 2013 movie about this odd arrangement, “Big Eyes,” culminates in a real life court scene: A federal judge, with the wisdom of Solomon, orders the couple, now separated and each claiming authorship, to each make a painting in his courtroom to see who is the pretender. Walter Keane could not, feigning a shoulder injury, and Margaret Keane painted the perfect doe eyed kid that the pop end of the art world found so adorable. Case decided in her favor. She went on to paint

commissioned portraits of Joan Crawford and Jerry Lewis, among others.

Woody Allen, who typically maintains a dim view of the future, showed his prescience by inserting a scene touching on this case in his 1973 movie "Sleeper," in which he is frozen in 1973 and then defrosted 200 years later. He wakes up to find Margaret Keane is regarded as one of the world's greatest artists. Now, 42 years after "Sleepers," I see at a respected art fair an entire gallery, Keane Eyes Gallery of San Francisco, dedicated to her work. The work is still kitsch but with such a compelling history many pony up to own one. Kudos to Woody.



Keane Eye Gallery of San Francisco booth at Art Hamptons.

Last year 15 galleries of South Korea showed up at ArtHamptons with a coordinated and slightly overblown program that included a catalog and a full court press that I wrote about [here](#).

This year nearly as many Korean galleries put down stakes in Southampton but to their detriment they did not coordinate among themselves. They are scattered about the fair instead of being in one area, diminishing the overall effect. The general quality is not as good and plenty of groaners were in evidence, as were the artists who made the long trip to accompany them. This is not Psy's Gangnam style.

The opening night traffic was overwhelming even for July in the Hamptons, with many unable to get near this spectacle. The show is open through Sunday July 5; the free parking was appreciated, and next week's Art Southampton should take notice of that.

BASIC INFO: ArtHamptons Art Fair, 900 Lumber Lane at Scuttle Hole Road, Bridgehampton, July 2 to July 5; free parking. www.arthamptons.com.

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