

ART REVIEW

A Grand Finale of Group Show Fireworks

By ROBERTA SMITH

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BACK in the day, most New York galleries coasted from Memorial Day to June 30 with a hastily flung-up group show, usually of gallery artists, sometimes lightly coated with a summery theme, and afterward closed until Labor Day. More recently, season's end has drifted ineluctably toward mid-August. Yes, there's a brief lull in mid-June while everyone troops off to Europe for the big shows and the Basel Art Fair. But then, bam, they're ba-a-ck! And the air is alive with the sound of gauntlets being thrown to the ground. Those gauntlets are your summer group shows.

Now the summer solstice unleashes a group show frenzy of, literally, unmanageable proportions. Artists or independent curators, dealers or their younger gallery directors bring it on, and the curatorial fireworks merge second wind with grande finale. Think of it as the art world version of Fashion Week, only longer and minus the seating charts.

Group shows are proliferating all over town, especially in Chelsea, with more opening this week and

next. But the energy of this year's explosion transcends format. New York seems to be having a Summer of Art unlike the 1967 Summer of Love in its liberating effects. Mark my words, or those of an astute junior observer who simply termed it "our June 2003 moment." Whatever, it's still going strong this weekend with an array of artworks, curatorial ideas and aesthetic developments that reveal the quickening, centrifugal vitality of contemporary art, a result of several combustible collisions or collusions.

One way to put it is that the "Return of the Real," as the critic Hal Foster noted in the late 1980's, is being met head on by the "Return of the Formal," most visibly in the prominence of saturated color that runs through these shows like a radiant thread (as it does through this year's Venice Biennale).

From another angle, the counterculture and avant-garde tendencies of the late 60's and early 70's continue their fruitful interaction. That is, the handicrafts, scavenging, sexual openness, psychedelic palette, body decaying

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David Zwirner Gallery.

"Debbie Harry," left, by Lee Quinonez; "Bright Lights, Big City" at the David Gallery, and part of "Walking on Their Installation by Eli Sudbrack, at Deitch

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erations and druggy spirituality of the hippie era are being given backbone by the reductionist tendencies, material eccentricities and political consciousness of Conceptual Art and Process Art.

Design and architecture are part of the mix, as are continuing variations on Graffiti Art. There is a fuller embrace of the Pleasure Principle, which is perhaps the most important legacy of popular culture. Artists want to have fun, but not just fun. Call it responsible hedonism. Op Art's revenge.

Implicit is a free-flowing equality of media, mixed or unmixed. Video has assumed the very position into which it forced painting in the late 1980's: it is now one among many means of expression. Artists are developing so many distinctive and individual ways of working with it that often you barely see it anymore. Finally, in all mediums, collage, sampling, appropriation, bricolage, recycling—call it what you will—continues to mutate and expand as an artistic strategy, an ecological statement and a metaphor for inclusiveness.

Greene Naftali

First, stretching from Chelsea to SoHo to Williamsburg, are several efforts that capture the centrifugal Summer of Art mix, which includes a great deal of music, with new artistic and curatorial talent.

One of the best of these shows is "Regarding Amy" at the Greene Naftali Gallery, organized by the prescient Carol Greene. Here, the equality of mediums is laid out with unusual clarity in painting, video, collage and even craft—the latter being a stained-glass installation by Amy Gartrell, to whom the show is partly dedicated. Indeed, her cloud raining teardrops on spiders and webs (breaking a few hearts in the process) sets the stage for the prismatic color, poetic juxtaposition and segmented structure present in several of the works on view.

Prismatic color reigns in Elif Uras's slightly daft, wooly paintings of art-conscious interiors; Christian Holstad's hallucinatory Rorschach dreamscapes based on White House interiors and most spectacularly in an amazing kaleidoscopic DVD environment (digital stained glass) by Jim Drain and Ara Peterson (formerly of Forcefield), who, with a small triangular screen and three mirrors, have concocted an endless geodesic structure that pulses through a veritable history of abstract pattern.

photo-appropriation as found collage is evident in Mr. Holstad's "We'll Make Great Mud," which consists of all the 234 images in the picture file labeled "Homosexuals" at the New York Public Library, carefully photocopied and housed in an exact replica of their acid-free box. They range through art, street photography, news photos, magazine covers and soft-core pornography, forming what Mr. Holstad calls a "stereotype welcome wagon" in an accompanying text that, with his ever-present sense of craft, turns the assembled images into a work of art.

A third standout is Paul Chan's extraordinary "Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization—Fourier," a DVD animation that builds on the trials and tribulations of the Vivian Girls, the intrepid heroines of the great outsider artist Henry Darger. Alternately violent, idyllic and scatological, this work echoes the scroll-like proportions and collaged surfaces of Darger's work, while elaborating their saga with glimpses of Fournier's pleasure-prone Utopia and contemporary touches. The girls' tormentors now include men in

Mr. Chan also reveals the sexual and emotional attachments implicit in their tribelike loyalty, not to mention in Darger's own obsessions. The flowers, rolling landscapes and scudding clouds of Darger are all here, in burning stained-glass colors. This is a brilliantly imagined work.

The color and youthful inclusiveness of "Regarding Amy" is expanded upon in a crowded Be-In of a show—three shows, really—organized by Daniel Reich, John Connelly and Scott Hug, editor of K&S magazine, at D'Amelio Terras on West 22nd Street (review, page 33).