

art ltd.

Critic's Picks: Chicago

by james yood

Mar 2013

April isn't the cruelest month in Chicago, because March and April are. That's when winter stubbornly lingers on, teasing a spring you become convinced will never come. In the Chicago art community, March and April used to mean preparation for the huge international art fair held every May from 1980 to 2011, the big blowout that capped the year. But that's been moved to September now, and Chicago's faux spring is cause for, well, more of the art world same, a wide range of gallery exhibitions, some hits, some misses, but enough percolating along to keep you hoping for something wonderful in the next stop on your itinerary. So bring a warm coat; spring is definitely just around the corner, but in Chicago that corner is always twenty blocks away.



Untitled Portrait with Blue Drip and Painted Hat

2012

Ed Valentine

Oil on canvas

24" x 18"

Photo: courtesy Linda Warren Projects

You'd think that the human face would be exhausted as a subject matter in art by now, but as long as they keep making people we'll remain obsessed with faces, that eternal first sign of self. **Ed Valentine**--he lives and works in Ohio--is a great headhunter, a maestro of physiognomy, who understands the first rule of faces--we can't help but keep looking carefully at interesting and communicative ones. He slathers segments of paint very liberally over the faces of his subjects, at first glance almost clown-like in their motley defacement. But they're actually very subtle and in his attentiveness to their carriage, their posture, their relation to their clothes and backgrounds, they're imbued with personhood and character that's surprisingly classic, somewhat akin to what Jim Nutt has been achieving in recent years. A newer

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body of work is even more edgy; Valentine mixes a kind of painterly surface graffiti with just a tiny hint of physiognomy, with a disembodied realistically rendered eye staring out at you, 2% of the surface evoking 100% of person. He's on view at Linda Warren Projects through April 5.



Fag Ash Lill

2011

Frieke Janssens

Photo: courtesy Catherine Edelman Gallery,

Copyright: Frieke Janssens

If you don't like faces, you've just got to love kids. Kids dressed up like adults. And smoking. That's been the project of Brussels-based photographer **Frieke Janssens** for the last few years, "Smoking Kids," on view at Catherine Edelman Gallery March 8 - May 4. They're cute, these little pre-pubescent tykes puffing away at cigarettes and stogies, all staged by Janssens in sort of 1920s adult garb and attitudes, exuding that sophistication and slightly bored ennui that only being proto-adult and filled with smoke can achieve. She employs a round format for every photo, and this project seems all in good fun, as if you had a dolled-up fifth grade class endlessly performing Downton Abbey. Janssens perfectly understands the erotics of smoking, how the cigarette is held, the smoke exuded, the oral fixation, the hand manipulation, the fire, the endless fussing with butts and ash, etc., and putting all that in the hands of children makes it deliciously eerie. If only the damned smokes didn't kill you!

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Marcela
2012

Carlos Estrada-Vega

Wax, limestone dust, oleopasto, oil, pigment
on wood

34" x 34"

Photo: courtesy Roy Boyd Gallery

New Mexico-based **Carlos Estrada-Vega** is showing new work at Roy Boyd Gallery through April 16, and continues his poetic pursuit of the relationship between the pixel and the grid. It wasn't that long ago that images downloaded slowly onto computers, appearing first as grids of pixels that only eventually took sharper visual focus, that in their interim states were curiously evocative and suggestive. That's Estrada-Vega's turf, he makes tiny wooden blocks, usually no more than one-inch square, and richly textures each one with a mixture of oil paint and limestone dust. He then composes huge geometric grids of them, putting each in order in rows, sometimes thousands of them, usually using magnets to secure the 'pixels' together. They end up often comprising dappling abstractions, but sometimes offering just the periphery of representation, of landscapes or skyscapes, if only--and they never do--the pixels would dissolve into focus. It's like Seurat meets Mondrian.

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Comic Landslide
2012

Judith Geichman

Acrylic and enamel on canvas

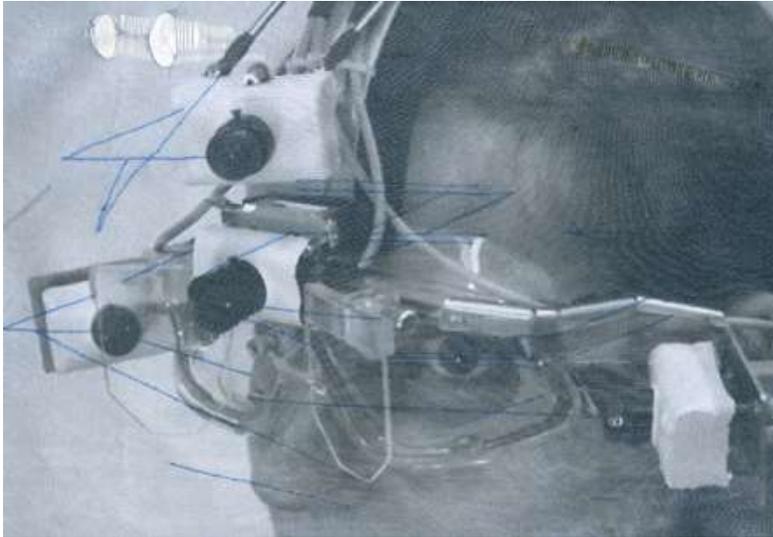
60" x 60"

Photo: Courtesy Carrie Secrist Gallery

Judith Geichman is an abstract Chicago painter, which already makes her a bit of an anomaly in a city still dominated by figurative artists. And, as indicated by her show at Carrie Secrist Gallery, up through March 30, she steadfastly holds on to the dream of expressive gestural abstract painting: the struggle to make a mark, then make another mark, and then another until you've wreaked out some kind of hard-won resolution, until you've searched and experimented and scraped and abandoned and struggled to get paint--in this case acrylic and enamel--to come to a kind of stasis, a result where the painting achieved a state of fulfillment. It's never anarchy, though, far from it, and Geichman here sets up rules to circumscribe the journey. Each canvas is five-foot square, all made with same materials, and all realized in black, gray and white. It's about the process and the journey, of course, the unseen hours of Geichman's tussle to coax meaning out of stuff, and these paintings are both sober and engrossing.

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Stocking /Eye Tracking
2013

Kate Levant

Collage
8½" x 11"

Photo: courtesy the artist and moniquemeloche

Kate Levant is from Chicago too, though she since moved on to Detroit and is now living in Amsterdam. For "Inhuman Indifference," her upcoming show at Monique Meloche Gallery, April 13 - June 8, she's ranging more widely than she did in last year's Whitney Biennial, where her work collaging together Detroit detritus had that evocative Rauschenberg sensitivity to rearranging found objects, working with, rather than upon, materials. But we're all Detroit, in a sense--crumbling, collapsing, somehow noble, insistent on existence no matter what, survivors, shambles always reconstituting. Levant's new work is even more mysterious, and seems underpinned by a kind of yearning that is very palpable, the beginnings of a focus on self. It includes crusty corrugated relief elements interwoven with deconstructed stockings into what seem veils of personhood. But there's also unexpected intrusions of depictions of elements of nature. It's all of a kind of stream of consciousness--gentle, generous, ambiguous, and very inviting. I can't wait to see this exhibition.



All Your Vulnerabilities Will Be Assessed (detail)

2012

Deb Sokolow

Graphite, charcoal, acrylic, ink, tape, adhesive and collage on paper

18" x 325"

Photo: Courtesy Western Exhibitions

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You can see **Deb Sokolow's** work this spring both at Western Exhibitions in Chicago (March 15 - April 20) and at her one-person show at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford Connecticut (up through June 30). Either way you'll be seeing a unique and mesmerizing talent, a real text-maniac who tells quirky but compelling original narratives in her schematic scrolls and works on paper. In Chicago, she's focused on a 28-foot long drawing based on her recent two-month residency at the Nordisk Kunstnarsenter Dalsasen in Norway. Imagery is dolloped in and out, but her focus is on the playful text design, with her rambling but surprisingly pertinent handwritten observations inscribed in carefully determined rows of variously scaled text. As with graphic novels you pinball back and forth from the narrative as self sufficient to accessing it as graphic design. It's clever and disarming, presented here through Sokolow's mock protagonist, an artist who is also a disgruntled security guard at the Art Institute of Chicago on this residency to Norway, and the trials and tribulations that accrue along the way. Somewhere between Kafka and Chris Ware--but wincingly funny!--this is complex, idiosyncratic work which functions superbly on many levels.

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