

CAST ASIDE, BROUGHT FORTH

Two One-Man Exhibitions Harmonize in Process-Detail and Past-Deference

by Blair Schulman

Josh George: *New Work*

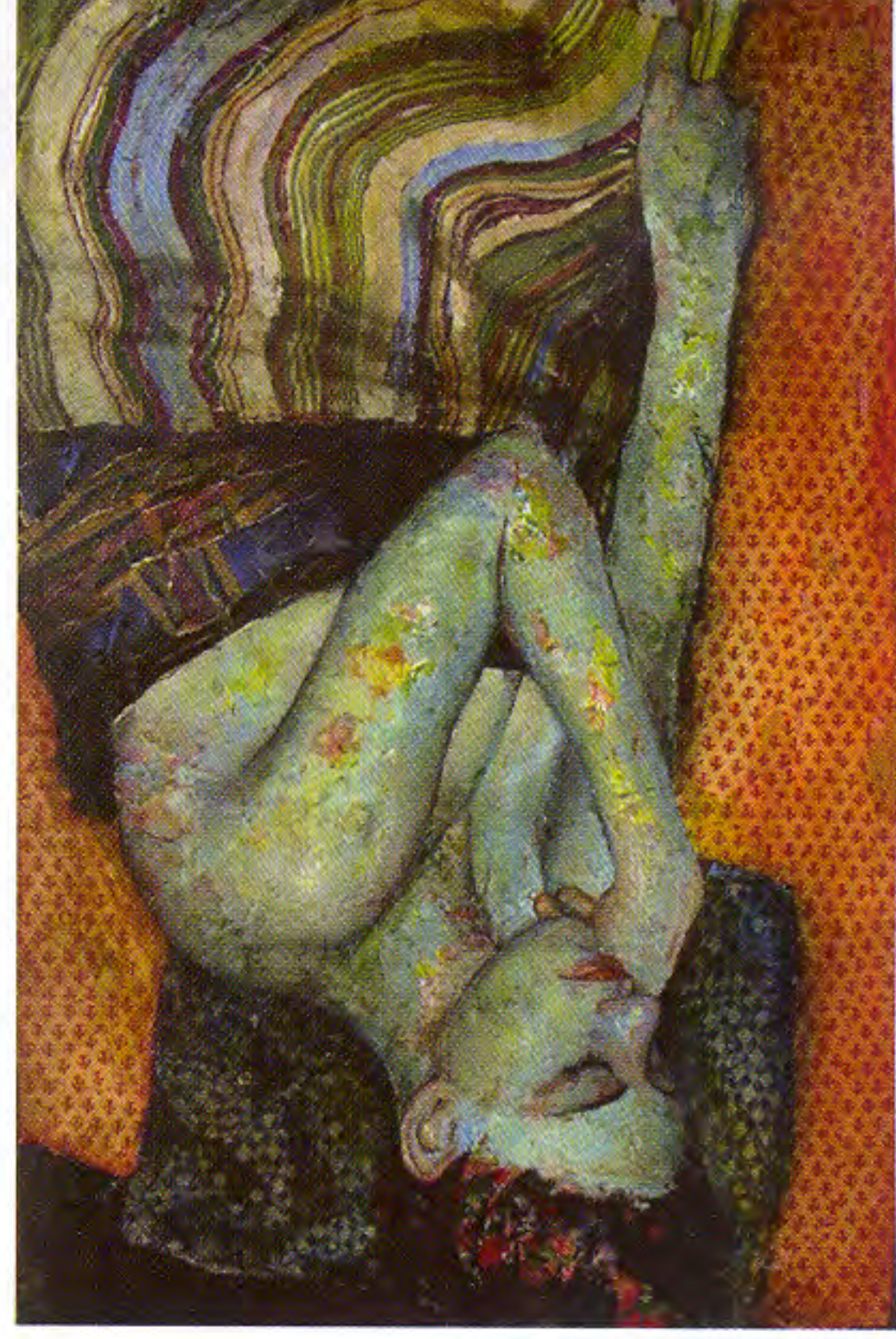
In a collection of paintings that studies the current state of isolation and societal displacement, Josh George exposes these flaws by embracing the past. His work is suffused in layers of pattern samples and found objects, each a mixed-media collage combined with oil on panel. Using remains that might otherwise be ignored, he gives the torn labels, maps, train tickets — just to name a few materials — a new utilization and definition. George paints with a sensitivity that ensures all senses are engaged and creates a dialogue with each piece. He does not give into flattery. His human subjects are depicted as fully dimensional but disengaged. They are people who fail but who try, try again, even while appearing totally alone. It is a dynamic of the human condition to persevere, and because of the depth George creates, he enables the viewer to care even more.

A series of both large and small cityscapes exposes and studies the mythologies of the urban world. These are places that are rapidly succumbing to a non-glorious rejuvenation of glass and steel. George devises an antidote to what he says is “a complete disregard for quality and craft, valuing only speed and (perceived) efficiency.” He reminds us of the lives inside these older buildings, such as in *Apparatus Interference*, which shows offices and apartment houses with windows one could imagine looking up at in order to see inside — perhaps, to get a sense of the life that is being lived behind them. The connection between the inhabitant and the street is important to society and should not be ignored. That necessary connection is clearly shown again in *Saunter Through Subversion*, in which a solo man crosses a main thoroughfare totally at ease with his surroundings.

All the work is textured, so viewers are encouraged to look more closely: a scrape here, a new layer there — exposing, hiding, then exposing again a pattern or swirl — all show us how George’s technique is very deliberate and process oriented. This is most successful in his larger panels; a series of hand-sized cityscapes included in the exhibition were not very striking. He creates “chaos” initially, he says, by “throwing everything in my arsenal at the surface,” knowing that he will eventually “come back to rescue and control it.” Like the past he references, each painting has a history all its own, and one can easily examine it, wondering what is happening and what has already occurred. History is the soul of our future.

Alongside portraits of buildings from the past and people contemplating their present, are a series of portraits of the artist’s wife in various stages of repose. *Adored and Composed at Ease* is one that stands out. Picking out soft floral patterns for the collage stage, he paints over those elements with softer, cooler grays to “create different color vibrations to make action on a very still subject ... to see how the color charges the gray.” The effect is dynamic. In this painting, the subject is completely relaxed, the patina of her skin is almost bluish, like a cooling off, giving the impression of an exhausted Aphrodite. *Delightful Somnolent Tartlet Trance* is another vision, in close-up, of her in deep REM sleep, totally at peace and cozy in gingham and striped patterns, protected during her rest.

Embracing his artistic forebearers from the Ashcan School, he goes after subjects that show his frustration with the current culture and utilizes textured methods from the early 20th-century era. He depicts people sitting in cafés, but not connecting with one another in *To Regale Luxuriously* and *Give Free Scope To*. Preoccupied, tasks are overlooked — a glass of wine is poured, but misses the glass. A young woman prepares to eat from a bowl of live, squawking birds in *Bird Nanny*, but she is so totally engrossed with herself, so emotionally distracted, she does not even notice them. “It seems as though success in America is often at the expense of meaningful relationships and human interaction,” George says. In a response to a society whose members work alone in a cubicle, talk on a cell phone in the street, near others but completely disengaged from



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Phillip Ahnen: *Form Follows (Implied) Function*
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their proximity, George examines the frustration with the emphasis on solitude. Exhausted with attaining the good life, the “skewed priorities,” he thinks about the way we sustain ourselves. His work implores us to improve our existence if we “took the time to prepare actual meals ... gather around the table with friends and family to discuss problems and big ideas, to once again, be a part of a culture.” This work expresses a longing for this “slowed-down, simple, yet whole, way of life.” The artist is almost daring us to re-connect with ourselves, our surroundings and not to be afraid of what could emerge as a result.

