The Midwest Art Quarterly

Est. St. Louis, Missouri, 2022

Volume I | January-March, 2023 | Issue 2

"Great art gives us an interpretation of life which enables us to cope more successfully with the chaotic state of things and to wring from life a better, that is, a more convincing and more reliable, meaning."

—Arnold Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History*

Editorial: Criticism, Regionalism, and the Midwest Art Quarterly

There are a handful of problems with art writing at present which the Midwest Art Quarterly, in however small a way, sets out to remedy. These journalistic problems are both the cause and the effect of more general problems with the institution of Contemporary Art; the latter, however, are well outside the scope of this editorial to explain, or any publication to solve. Only artists can do the solving, but then again only with criticism at their backs.

The most pervasive and pressing of these problems has to do with that phrase, "art writing." It refers to a spiritless style of journalism about the fine arts that has proliferated since about the 1980s. The dominance it achieved around the new millennium, which it continues to enjoy, led to a spate of think-pieces in the early aughts lamenting the demise of an older approach. Those fell mostly on deaf ears. Today, writers on art outside of the academy typically choose to describe their work as "art writing" rather than "art criticism." This is indicative of the state of the field: millions of words are written for hundreds of journals and magazines, and nearly all of them (excepting cases of ideological reprimand) are either positive or simply explanatory. What does this suggest about the present condition of the artworld and, more importantly, the quality of the art that gets made within it?

Our experience, which we should trust unequivocally, tells us that a definite minority of all the Contemporary Art we see is worth seeing twice, let alone capable of potentially stirring emotions a century from now. It is possible, as art writing tends to do, to expound the intended purpose of *any* work of art and to justify it completely on theoretical grounds without grappling at all with the sorts of experience the work stimulates for us. The acritical nature of art writing therefore supports a dual state of affairs wherein artists are not encouraged to create new forms for their art, and viewers are discouraged from labeling the stuff they see as just plain unsatisfying. (Think of how many times you've been embarrassed for "not getting it," or else afraid you missed something because the way you "got it" didn't make you feel a thing.) So while not just the lay public, but increasingly Contemporary Art's initiates develop a sense of alienation towards what's on current offer, they are given nothing that might provide them with either a vindication of their own experiences or a reasoned account of art's effects against which to position their own.

This is what art criticism is meant to do, and in so doing contribute to the establishment of a common language for discussing, experiencing, and making art: the critic Donald Kuspit once called it "the public square in which [art] is the central monument." Art writing, however, supports its objects of analysis unequivocally, and therefore gives over the question of their value to invisible forces (one might be tempted to call them "invisible hands") within the apparatus of Contemporary Art.

As happens to all styles of art and thought, there will eventually be a reaction against this one, which in different guises has been dominant for around fifty years. There is reason to believe that this reaction, when it comes, will be provincial in character. Contemporary Art's core principle that any person anywhere can make art on terms that are entirely their own has led to an eerie sameness of formal toolkits and conceptual preoccupations across the entire globe, from Senegal to St. Louis. It would not be surprising if what comes next avers its regionalism and values this over smooth universal legibility. This reaction could look like small groups of artists in out-of-the-way places growing dogmatic and insular as they work out forms which, for a time at least, are indigestible outside of their own very particular domains.

In such a situation, artists working beyond the direct pull of the nodes of Contemporary Art — artists, say, in Midwestern cities — would be well-positioned to band up and start defining collective approaches to solving artistic problems which they themselves create. Asserting a group identity through the elaboration of a shared and idiosyncratic formal language, they would find themselves in the early stages of fashioning an alternative to art in its sclerotic present state, which has in large part been defined by an absence of movements and an overabundance of eclectic individual styles. What this would amount to would be something that we have not had in a major way for some time: a serious and thoroughly articulated regional style.

All of what I've said could be a good objective analysis of the cultural position we currently find ourselves in. It could also be a conflation of the whole arc of art's history with our (Midwesterners) presently marginal position within it. The wager that MAQ would like to make is that this distinction doesn't really matter. Regardless of where our culture is headed and whether Midwesterners actually have an ordained place at its helm, it is absolutely certain that artists everywhere require criticism, not art writing, to continue developing their art. They need consistent, thorough, concise engagement with their own work and all the other art that's happening around them; they need a way to look at the art of the past that contributes to their understanding of what they themselves are doing; they need an audience not just of bodies at openings, but of people empowered to trust and express their personal experiences of artworks. Whenever genuine art criticism is engaged with — whether in agreement or disagreement or some mixture of both — it contributes to the development of these essential conditions for the production and appreciation of serious art. Providing one component of such a groundwork for a strong and legitimate regional art is the purpose of the Midwest Art Quarterly.

—T.S.

Bruno David Gallery
Jim Brainard: Bits & Pieces
Mario Trejo: Idiosyncratic Tantrums
Ryan Eckert: Two Worldviews
Sara Ghazi Asadollahi: Chaos
March 10-April 22

The treat of this season at Bruno David is *Chaos*, a short video looped in the gallery's media room. When I say short, I mean short. This is probably the work's biggest problem: it's made up of two still frames that each last for a couple minutes. Brevity as such isn't the issue, but rather the sense one gets watching Asadollahi's video that it could've handled much more of itself. The plaintive, empty feeling which the piece does a good job of conveying would have been strengthened by more cuts than the one we get. The two shots it does comprise — which show some kind of craggy, miniaturized-looking structure full of candles — are nearly expressive enough, but don't quite have the inevitability that would have allowed them to uphold the entire work. A score contributes to the video's plangency, but the fact that I'm struggling now to remember much about it suggests that it might have been better integrated with its images.

Brainard's is the gallery's next most worthwhile exhibition. While he struggles in certain collages to overcome the communicativeness of the mass materials he sometimes incorporates — the flat colors and sans serifs of magazine pages are not his friends — the works he assembled from more anonymous stuff are better, if certainly decorative, by way of their minimally troubled abstractness. Those with arcane symbols hold the most promise.

Eckert and Trejo round out this season for David with middling exhibitions of painting and drawing, respectively. Eckert's sense of weight and depth is all wrong, as are his colors and his handling, but he has a basic eye for arrangements that could be developed. Trejo succeeds moderately in a couple scratchy red line drawings on black ground, but the rest of his show fails to make good on its simple conception.

—T.S.

Cunst Gallery
Carlos Salazar-Lermont
January 13-February 26

Salazar-Lermont's theoretical obsession with the body, with which his Cunst show reeked, is likely the thing putting the most distance between him and serious art. The works at Cunst that rose above this obsession — or, more generously, that found within it something artistic rather than merely academically sanctioned — were of a much higher quality than their overarticulated *raisons d'etre* would suggest.

These were the two videos. Besides them, several photos and photo series suffered from inadequate composition and an overemphasis on their narrative-conceptual dimension. A large print depicting the artist as Christ leaning on a broomstick was, to its detriment, more interested in considering what it might feel like to desacralize the Passion than in actually presenting an image that could have done so more than superficially. A series of photos showing a tattoo fade away was likewise too slick intellectually and too simple formally. A set of icons hardly offered more than a statement about the banal erotics of religion.

The videos, though, were crisply emotive portraits that used notions of defectibility and precarity — poststructural-type stuff about the body — to get at effects much more felt and transparent than their sources would likely allow. In one, dual channels showed Salazar-Lermont pressing one finger through a fish's body and another into his own chest simultaneously. Anonymous staging and a slight mismatch between the framing and the lighting of the two channels exacerbated the raw violence of these actions. In the other, the artist sat tourniqueted with his arms on a white table in a white room. These blank surroundings brought out the colorful creeping of ecchymosis in his arm and, as he tilted slightly forward, the suppressed anguish this caused in his face. A bizarre, refined reflection on pain, this video was the show's peak.

—T.S.

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Houska Gallery

Roscoe Hall: Caution Increases

February 10-March 24

On its own, Hall's impasto is frequently good to the same degree that his colors and his arrangements give it nothing much of value to deliver. This is to say that his very muscular technique, which certainly has its place, is scarcely justified by much about the paintings he makes with it, which often feel arbitrary. They're too full of drips and smudges — the wares of an artist grasping for effect — and their lines are too sure of themselves to be delineating such meager scenes. More than anything, these paintings are dragged down by their colors, which at their worst coagulate into planes of daub after garish daub.

The two marginal successes in this show are essentially compositional successes, to the extent that their arrangements apologize profusely enough for Hall's colors and his unresolved handling. One is called *Communication is OFF*, the other *Animal Shapes*. Both use a red balloon thrown to one side of the canvas to counterbalance a figure knocked into the other; both set up a tenuous rectilinearity which they fuck with through curves and poor angles. Either would have gained from more seriousness. (Hall, as one Traylor-esque painting suggests, has outsider aspirations, but in fact the "visionary" elements of his pictures tend to be the least convincing.)

Frankly — and I write this without a shred of derision — Hall might have done better to display the backs of his paintings. There, he scrawls out the "medium" of

each piece as though it were an absurdist recipe. (Hall is a professional chef.) These are funny and personal. The way Hall squeezes words between his stretchers' crossbars, or else fills up the entire plane with quick but clear capitals and the occasional sketch, has a plain visual power that often beats the more studied stuff on the other side.

—T.S.

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Laumeier Sculpture Park

Yayoi Kusama: Narcissus Garden

February 11-May 14

I haven't been in an *Infinity Mirror Room* or for that matter encountered anything else by Yayoi Kusama, so I'll be careful to limit my aspersions to just what I saw at Laumeier. I'd be lying, though, if I said that my skepticism about Kusama's project didn't precede my visit to this show — I find it hard to believe that something so adored could be recycled for a whole half century without growing decadent. Nor did anything about my experience of *Narcissus Garden* suggest that there's much besides sheen to Kusama's environments, plus maybe a wide-eyed appreciation for all that art can be. Appreciation, though, seldom passes muster without commensurate execution.

It's likely that the venue, not the artist, is largely responsible for the poor execution of *Narcissus Garden*. Kusama first staged the piece, which here comprises about a thousand metal spheres crowding the floor of Laumeier's indoor gallery, at Venice in 1966. There, a crucial component of the work was Kusama's presence alongside it: she hawked the balls for $2 apiece, making her garden as much a social as a physical sculpture. This would have shunted responsibility for the artwork's effect away from the placement of the balls and onto the relation between it and Kusama's performance. This may not have been good, but I bet it would have made the work's glint and repetition seem more poetic than formulaic (as it seemed at Laumeier).

I don't think that Kusama was involved in this installation, which is suspect. But had she been, it probably wouldn't have mattered much: sure, it's possible that there's a way these orbs could have been arranged to make their reflectivity come off as something other than navel-gazing, but I have trouble imagining it. Absent its conceptual dimension, Kusama's work seems like little but spectacle.

—T.S.

Monaco
Faithfully Askew Too
January 20-February 5

Good as some of the individual works in *FAT* certainly were, taken together they spoke to the problem I brought up in this issue's editorial: over and above the shared perspectives and common tools for expressing them that together might constitute a movement, present art is committed to the individuated approaches of its many artists. The five members of Monaco, who exhibited together in *FAT*, possess five thoroughly articulated, incommensurable, almost sealed-off practices. In a word, the members of one of the most cohesive groups of artists in this city, who run the venue most consistently promoting current art, produce their own work as though they're each in a vacuum.

This is less etiological than symptomatic. Nor does it say much about the work itself. My dissatisfaction with *FAT* derived from the failure of its whole to seem greater than the sum of its parts. Here and there, though, its parts had stuff to offer. Take Nick Schleicher's paintings, the best of which were the best in the show. Often, they failed to present the contingencies of Schleicher's process as significant elements of his paintings' form. But whenever they managed, balancing purposiveness with ambiguity, to register some trace of how they were made, this lent their glitziness a sense of depth that was both visual and conceptual. Emily Mueller's drawings hit their colors right and nearly managed to get away with their decorativeness. Marina May's text work was unassuming and sweet. Edo Rosenblith had trouble making his roughness feel unstudied, but a hard-edged painting on a shaped panel nearly came off. Kalaija Mallery's work landed flattest, but only because the elements of her super-conceptual practice had promise which they just didn't realize. With a skosh less aplomb and a smidge more absurdity, her network of thoughts and objects might have soared.

—T.S.

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Monaco
Liz Whelan: To Go Back and Forth
February 17-March 5

In displaying art, a choice exists between an indexed presentation of individual works and a presentation that uses the gallery to create an immersive environment. While there are cases where something in between can be effective, this was not achieved in Whelan's exhibition. Her show contained abstract, colorful felted and woven fiber works that were undermined by their incoherent presentation. The indexed model would have required more careful attention to the arrangement of the works than was apparent, while only a few meek attempts at immersion were made.

For example: three of the smallest works proceeded around a gallery corner, with one folded around the corner itself. Such attempts to "engage the space" as part of an otherwise indexed presentation distracted from Whelan's often wonderful work rather than helping the viewer to enter her soft, mottled world.

In the selection of its entries as well as their presentation, *To Go Back and Forth* was also characterized by incoherence. The works appeared to have been chosen from a two-year period in Whelan's practice, in necessary quantities to fill the space rather than to convey a properly resolved artistic proposition. This resulted in an off-putting mixture. Many of the works displayed a specific, sensitive beauty and (sometimes) a compositional sophistication. Yet two of the largest pieces strayed from these strengths — one was seemingly designed to push one's ideas of taste into a gloomy state of postmodern irony; the other drafted on the current taste for warped-gridded graphics (which were employed more successfully by Zeitler-Ellison in Monaco's back gallery.)

—J.C.

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Monaco

Betsy Zeitler-Ellison: Run Run Run

February 17-March 5

At a time when many young artists feel creatively trapped by what seems like a lost-cause culture, Zeitler-Ellison expresses the dual helplessness and ecstasy of this gloom. Like many of the great works of Western art, Zeitler-Ellison's glorifies mankind's eternal vanity in pursuit of something perfect. In *Run Run Run*, she employed the stylish language of Judeo-Christian spaces — religious ritual is often proposed as a coping mechanism — but made good on the vogue, especially by means of her excellent draftsmanship. This show's power derived from a tension between the expansive mystery of its images and the tight, crowded mode of their presentation. Had the show been made just a bit more purposefully immersive, the transcendent space Zeitler-Ellison intended could have been fully realized.

The show began with a magical descent: the first piece was displayed at a low height, forcing the viewer to crouch — and physically to enter Zeitler-Ellison's world. In this world, symbolism and enigma abounded. This was carried through a procession of virtuosic graphite renderings and engraved steel plates. These steel works, which mixed text and image, brought Zeitler-Ellison's symbolism to its climax while maintaining the mystery of her world.

Run Run Run also comprised one painting, two rabbit pelts, and a laser-cut wood relief. The painting, while depicting some of the artist's most gesturally poignant creatures, was displayed incorrectly. Due to its relatively large size, its position at the center of the installation drew too much attention away from the show's overall spatial progression. The pelts were well-intentioned but failed to match the sensitivity of Zeitler-Ellison's two-dimensional work — not because of the images they

presented, but because of the artist's apparent unfamiliarity with the material values of these three-dimensional objects. The laser-cut work, much like the pelts, seemed to have been more concerned with satisfying a taste for intermedia than supporting the show's otherwise convincing unity. Both would have been better left out.

—J.C.

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Saint Louis University Museum of Art

Exploring the Figure

March 10-May 28

Despite the fact that this show is an almost unspeakable mess, it features enough curios from SLUMA's vaults to justify a visit. Chief among these is an ink wash by Correggio depicting the Pentecost. Fast and full of elisions, it makes the scene into a deluge of ambiguous action and cast glances. Some of the drawing's effect may indeed derive from its patina: a smudgy aureole around the head of the Virgin exacerbates the sense of her holiness which Correggio otherwise cultivated through diaphanous modeling. That this is likely just a stain doesn't need to lessen the delight we take in the master's sketch. Whether an accident of aging or a bit of mutated intent, it plays into the whole scene's Blakean weightlessness, a kiss from God at the drawing's navel.

The rest of the show's master drawings — done by anonymous workmen, minor painters, the worst Carracci — aren't nearly as beautiful, but together they have a certain interest as artifacts. Their strained sculpting and awkward architecture remind us that, through the centuries, taste really has done an alright job separating the wheat from the chaff. A better curatorial framing might have allowed for a profounder takeaway than this, but it is hard to look too historically at the transeuropean, centuries-spanning smattering of doodles that have been slapped together.

In terms of this show's issues, though, that's just the tip: it compiles everything from Mesopotamian ceramics to a Chuck Close print under the banner of "the figure." Its entire conceit is something like, "There have been figures depicted in art." Finding the gems requires cutting through the exhibition's messy framework, but they're certainly there: a long Melanesian hanging sculpture; lithos by Saint Phalle and Kiki Smith; a Duchampian Roberto Matta print.

—T.S.

The Sheldon
BFA Exhibitions
Bill Steber: Hill Country Spirits
Landscape: Sarah Lorentz and Misato Pang
February 10-May 6

If it's true that the only real criticism of a work of art is another work of art, then what is one to make of a tribute to a merely decent regional painter? Lorentz and Pang, whose dual exhibition *Landscape* is dedicated to Wallace Herndon Smith, clearly find in this 20th-century painter a proper forerunning St. Louisan, adept in watercolor and oil. As to why they do, however, the exhibition is of little help: the majority of the works here seem even to have been completely misnumbered. What Lorentz and Pang have exhibited, however adequate, is mostly a dilution of Smith's already simple style, which ranges from Versailles to St. Louis painted calmly in the after-language of French Impressionism. In Smith's works, some of which are displayed here alongside those of his acolytes, the use of color is pleasant and muted and earthy. It's even charming to see some Midwestern spaces rendered this way, though on the whole there's an emptiness and a crudeness to the paintings that seems more an absence of refinement and elegance than, say, a child-like intuition.

Of *Hill Country Spirits*, I can only report that Bill Steber takes perfectly good black-and-white photos: he clearly has an eye for interesting faces. His cycle on black Delta Blues features some compelling images, though as with most photography, it must essentially claim an educational purpose for itself. We can hardly take a few sentimental portraits as an aesthetic experience on the level of a Gordon Parks (or some similar documentarian), whose work especially continues to set the tone for this kind of photographic anthropology.

Of the BFA exhibitions on view, the paintings and drawings of Eavan O'Neil are best. Though screaming a certain kind of self-conscious collegiate quirk, they have a real personal quality. Her self-portrait is the most striking and memorable thing up now at the Sheldon.

—S.J.

The Sheldon
Patrick Earl Hammie: I Am the Night
February 10-May 6

Let's begin with the good: Hammie's illustrations and paintings of performers and dancers from *Soul Train* are fine Pop renderings of one of America's most honestly celebratory artifacts. One senses the original program's beautiful sense of freedom and cultural ascendance, which many black artists have striven to recapture for generations since.

What these are juxtaposed with, however, is one of the dullest possible examples of the contemporary vogue. In this mode, we're typically informed that an artist is interrogating, challenging, or "disrupting" some narrative or assumption. In *I Am the Night*, this manifests as the nostalgia of *Soul Train* contra the hell of lynching photographs, which Hammie abstracts into massive Rorschach blot-prints. The artist goes on about what the art is supposed to communicate to us, what it "speaks to," and soon all the potential mystery of the art seems quite anemic. We're then given the images — in Hammie's case indistinguishable from ink blots (or blank backgrounds, scans, etc.) — and instructed to trust that lofty artistic ambitions justify the clear nothingness on display.

If my reaction to Hammie's work sounds like that of an uneducated yokel, then perhaps the issue lies in our aesthetic education. Abandoning any belief in artistic standards for a world devoted to the limiting of self-expression by imported ideologies has left us stranded in a haze of concepts and platitudes for too long. Where have we put our common sense? Hammie clearly feels very seriously about his work; I don't intend to abuse him as such. Yet, in a statement accompanying his show, we are told that his art "faces audacious joy and terrorism toward considering how far we go to maintain community." This empty, syntactically unintelligible sentence is all one needs to see how little is really going on here.

—S.J.

Jasper Francis Cropsey, *The Narrows from Staten Island*, 1868, Oil on canvas

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum

One of the greatest impediments to American landscape painting has been the existence of the American landscape itself. The American eye has had to contend with a swallowing endless horizon, somehow perpetually wild and free of human influence. American distrust of the artificial shrinks from representing it, since who could *really* paint the Rocky Mountains? Our best landscapists have never measured up to Old World masters.

There are, however, some works that come close to realizing something American. And our St. Louis Art Museum is home to several. The best of them is perfectly-placed — centrally — up on the second floor: Jasper Francis Cropsey's *The Narrows from Staten Island*, a fine evocation of a rolling American vista. It's a shock today to see Staten Island so pastoral, yet Cropsey's was indeed the island of Walt Whitman, of pasture soon to give way to the creep of city and industry. In its quaintness, it could almost pass for European. Yet there's a particular green, and that blue channel of the Eastward-facing sea. Seek it out: see if you can't catch something distinctly American in it, in the brown-white cow grazing in the foreground, in the clear sky and the slip of rainbow at its corner.

—S.J.

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Marc Chagall, *Temptation*, 1912, Oil on canvas

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum

"If we had nothing of Chagall but his Bible," wrote Meyer Schapiro of the artist's 1950s series of illustrations for the Good Book, "he would be for us a great modern artist." Four decades earlier, the gaudy master was just beginning to work out his proper approach, as a modern artist, to religious imagery. SLAM's *Temptation*, depicting Adam's big mistake, is from 1912. Far from being "wholly free from self-conscious striving" (as Schapiro thought the later prints were), it exhibits what must be among the most hamfisted and heretical misunderstandings of Cubism from the movement's heyday. Chagall's typically dulcet colors — purples and greens, soft ocean blues — are nauseating here, hovering like smog around figures that appear sealed off from them. Chagall was always a linear painter, but typically more deft and sparing with his lines than arch-cubism allowed him to be: the style was something he needed to work through so as to disavow. The faceting up of *Temptation* meant a profusion of lines knocking his colors about and squaring them off against each other. Adam and Eve look plopped into the scene rather than imbued with it. If "what is beautiful" in the later illustrations "does not spring from a will to novel forms" (Schapiro again), *Temptation* certainly fails on account of its studied novelty.

—T.S.

Contributors

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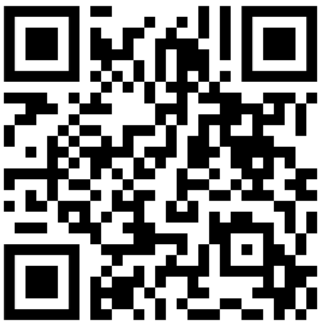

Vol. I, No. 2
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