ANNI ALBERS, ROBERT BECK, CADI NOLAND, JOAN SEMML, NANCY SHAVER

MATTHEW MARKS/Mitchell Algu/Curt Marcus
GALLERY, NEW YORK

KATY SIEGEL

How to deal with the art of the past—especially the recent past? As we flounder around for alternatives to the old do-anything-with-a-dad-modernist model (passive-aggressive postmodernism—i.e., replicate, don’t wrestle—was a nice try), three current shows take the lead, serving up yesterday three different ways.

As ever, context is everything. Joan Semmel looks like two different artists in the group show ("Anni Albers, Robert Beck, Cady Noland, Joan Semmel and Nancy Shaver: Black and White Photographs 1975–77") curated by Robert Gober at Matthew Marks and in her jewel of a solo ("Joan Semmel: Self-Images") at Mitchell Algu. Algu has earned a certain cachet mounting gently revisionist shows of left-out artists like Gene Beery, Nicholas Khasbe, and Harold Stevenson; here you see Semmel’s paintings the way you might have seen them back in 78; in an intimate space on the fringes of SoHo. At Marks, Semmel and Shaver are thrust into the present by Gober’s grouping and the insistent monumentality of the clean and monumental flagship Chelsea venue. Marcus falls somewhere in between, presenting a straightforward survey, "Nancy Shaver: Overall, 1975–1999."

Semmel’s self-portraits (three canvases at Algu and two at Marks, all dating from the mid-1970s to late-’70s), take on the traditional, objectified female nude. More complexly, she also plays on modernist flanerie, long associated with a masculine mode of intellect and rigorous empirical refusal. Semmel assiduously models her body’s curves and rolls, choosing poses that push depth, in On the Grass, 1978, she props herself up with one arm, looking down at the perpendicular ground. And while she began her nudes in the early ’70s in monochrome colors—purples, blues, etc.—by the time we reach the works on view at Algu, she is using a flagrantly naturalistic palette. (In her current work, she abandons the palette, working in a figurative, but more fanciful vein.)

If Semmel’s earlier work asks us to reexamine the light of younger artists such as Lisa Tuskavage, so Shaver’s resonates with the work of artists like Kiki Smith, Mike Kelley, and Gober himself (and, curiously, she comes off in some sense as an early appropriator). While Gober fills the second room at Marks with Shaver’s 1975–77 photos, flashtempted children’s clothing, primarily T-shirts emblazoned with labels and slogans like "Sinister," photos that are both conceptually witty and visually engaging, the wall on view in Shaver’s semi-retrospective at Curt Marcus is uneven. The better pieces combine found objects to capture an abstraction: For example, in The Civil War, 1985, she covers a rectangular support with blue and gray striped fabric, pulling and distorting the cloth at its north and south sides. But I don’t like the many pieces (such as Figure 6, 1997) that consist of the stuffing and wrapping and stacking of sacks and boxes. Here Shaver tries too hard to be pathetic yet austere, combining the unloved and the fondly regarded.

WHY THESE SHOWS OF NIGELED ARTISTS NOW? THIS GENERATIONAL KINK ALL MAKES SENSE IN LIGHT OF GOBER’S BRILLIANT INSTALLATION.

Why these shows of neglected artists now? This generational kink all makes sense in light of Gober’s brilliant installation at Marks. Seen from the artist’s perspective, Anni Albers’s weaving Black and White Grey, 1937, becomes the repressed homemaker; Robert Beck’s video Untitled (The Spike Buck), 1995, the worldly, violent father; with Cady Noland’s Stand-in for a Stand-in, 1999, stuck in between. On either side, two Semmel couples bracket this rug-of-weave. The second room holds the Shaver series, and in a tiny third room, the whole show is encapsulated: a study for the Albers, one Shaver tiny tee, and Semmel’s painting Bathing Andy, 1975, a huge little boy, naked.

Semmel has never looked weirder. The famous Intimacy: Autonymy, 1974, looks cold and blue here, more autonomous than intimate. The little space between the figures seems like a gulf, echoing that between the Albers tapestry and the Beck buckle. Gober, curator of the recent past, has intervened. Noland’s puritanical device is an after-the-fact maquette of her 1995–96 series of aluminum smokestacks. This "Stand-in" (and you have the feeling the Noland is standing in for Gober himself) doesn’t open, implying a figure forever trapped. Gober’s own family romance, to which he has occasionally alluded in his work, intersects with the historical romance of art, and while he critiques the narrowness of the former, he restores a certain breadth to the latter.

Marcus presents a standard, respected survey, but Algu and Gober give us something more complex. All three are valid ways to see the art: biographically, historically, and critically (respectively). Algu pays homage to the artist and the past, Gober to the viewer and the present. In a culture driven relentlessly by change, we need to be reminded that generations coexist; unlike butterflies, one group of human beings does not disappear when a new one emerges. There is a shortage of mid-career artists who have received the attention to maintain a serious oeuvre: critics set them aside, and then complain when the career meanders. So let’s see more of artists we’ve seen before—more of the recent past. Some will claim that, with these historical shows, galleries are usurping the function of museums, but perhaps the trend will force museums to acknowledge the rights and the wrongs of their own recent history. That would be interesting. And in any event, it’s nice to see a little now and then, now and then.
Enough About You
It must be something about that round calendar number. Over the past ten years I’ve kept my annual cards pretty close to my chest, but as we prepared this special issue of the 80s—just that happened to line up neatly with my tenure at Layton—I couldn’t resist throwing my lot in with our thirty-plus contributors and concluding my own desk-chair tour of the decade. After all, everyone knows all critics want to be artists, and all editors, writers—now there’s a man who can do the guilty-me decade.

We’re Not Worthy As long as we’re indulging in praising the decade’s art and culture into tidy ten-page chunks, I’ll confess that, for me, the ‘80s became the 80s when the PR-perfect ‘80s turned object. The “loss” theme (a phrase comes from Roland Barthes’s article in the September 1992 issue of the magazine, my first as editor) seemed to happen everywhere and all at once. We Munir’s “masterpiece” opened in SoHo; Jeff Koons’s “Peanut,” Ralph Rugoff’s West Coast roundtrip, made its way to LA from New York; filmmaker Richard Linklater’s subliminal documentarians showed up in theaters; and Karen Kilimnik’s, taking advantage of a chance for super-sized narcissism, began to exhibit her first film. Of course, culture doesn’t stick to best-of-decade rules; by the time we officially signaled the tempo change in that first issue, the last thing anyone was thinking about was the year we had caught it as it shifted. To me, the ‘80s were already going back to 1988, the year that Cindy Callen, the queen of the 1980s, wrote a book on Cindy Callen’s broadway gallery, Callen. The book was a hit. Victoria’s secret, which had once been a joke, was now a way of life. And Andy Warhol stretched them up, signed them, and presented them to Madame Schleier. In short, with one perceptible stroke he put his signature on the leading prince of the ‘80s. Remember when men’s suits were jackets, the way photographers were Xerox machines and scanned sound. Campbell’s? Well, we know now that Callen changed all that. Sure Andy knew it was wrong? Didn’t we think of that?

La Terraina Veggia Preliminary again: if the ‘80s were dominated by those twin headliners, Neo Ex and Neo-everything else, the quieter promise of that decade would be answered in the next by three of the most brilliant young photographers: Andreas Gursky and Jeff Wall. The latter turned to evoking the dead zone, the dream, the in-between that they so firmly affected. The last of this decade art is a testament to the fact that we’re one of the few art historians who still care about the art of the past, and we hope that our readers will find our work interesting.

The Hours and Times What makes an object, what is it, what makes it so? The good? The great? The ‘80s, mostly the latter. Twenty-nine-year-old director Christopher Walken turned out this 1992 jewel of a chamber piece, in which John Lennon (Ian Hart) and his manager, dandyish Brian Epstein (David Augue), spent an absolutely fascinating weekend in a London hotel suite. Set against the incipient rise of Beatlemania as Lennon jumps the band, leaving the world behind, this socially charged elegy to uncommercialization is surely the decade’s sole testament to mediocrity and great.

Gerhard Richter, David Reed, Bernard Frize, et al. Photography about painting—but also the other way around. I don’t deny what people say, I like paintings that look like photographs—especially when they’re abstract.

“The One Thing That Can Save America” In his 1973 poem, John Ashbery (with Wacholz, the other necessary imagination of this quotation present) puts the alternative question this way: “Where are the private events of the future, as long as they are long?” After years of hearing the poet’s view, I believe the artist only as the maker of the radically fascinating forty volumes that I had slumbered on as a clerk at FSizeMode early in my New York tenure, in the US at least, his reputation remained more than a mere cult. Link later the famous, trumped full of clichés, the long-suffering Soft Nipples, thirty-three plastic containers of marmalade. Paul McCarthy tracked the multiple to a Hancock Park garage where he had been stored and used since 1950 in his 1954 hearing, but as the war, as it happened, for our special October 1988 issue. By the time I visited Europe for the Venice Biennale, almost a year to the day of his death, Ruth’s ascension was absolute. Represented there by Steven Heine’s, his first multimedia installation, the artist presided over the international event, in ecstatic and beloved paternalism.

Pulp Fiction All symptoms—and greater Pulp Not that approval matters. We honor Tanztino just as much when we refuse it as when we embrace it. Plus, who can resist a guy who rolled the credits for his previous strengths? That of the same tone, “The Lime in the Coconut and Call Me the Morning”...