



Everything Old School Is New Again

*An exhibition of paintings from 1985 to 1995
reminds us of what we're missing*

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Jean Foos, "Snowball Sale" (1991)
Courtesy BWAC Gallery.

When you're hosting an art opening it's probably not a good idea to leave a six-foot-long two-by-four stud propped up where it can accidentally fall and smack a visiting critic on his writing shoulder. (Though, God knows, there are a few artists who wish it had landed on his head.) But raining lumber is of a piece with the rough-and-tumble ambience of "Painting to Survive," a group show of works created between 1985 and 1995 that embody the fervid energy and off-kilter beauty of a moment in history when AIDS was ravaging the artist community and gentrification was pricing painters out of lofts. But it was also the age of

Madonna and Public Enemy pouring from the radio and adventuresome theatrics in the downtown clubs, captured at the opening by the Frank's Museum Project's reunion performance of a sweetly melodic ditty about "the mayor's boyfriend" fixing parking tickets and cadging restaurant meals "all over town" — verses that might have been cribbed from one of Wayne Barrett's *Voice* articles about street-level corruption during those years.

It was the best of times and the harshest of times in New York City, and the contrasts and connections between hard partying and tragic illness emanate from a number of the works on the walls of the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition's vast, raw spaces. Lushly painted canvases by Jonathan Weinberg combine vistas of crisscrossing girders and staircases with triple-X signs and grappling nudes, conflating the labyrinthine structures of the West Side piers with intimations of the hardcore sex that took place in those derelict spaces back in the day. Weinberg also curated the show (in addition to his studio work, he is an art historian and teaches at Yale). The press release notes, "The early '80s saw an explosion of possibilities in Lower Manhattan for young artists to make and show work. Taking advantage of the economic upheavals of the 1970s, these children of the so-called 'Greatest Generation'

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Joel Handorff's livid colors channel this careening vibe. With magenta, yellow, and orange skin tones edged with acid-green highlights, the figures in *Mary* (1988) might recall German Expressionist works from early last century or a particularly garish MTV video. This aura is enhanced by Handorff's technique of painting on the back of Plexiglas, adding a heightening gloss to his hues. Conversely, the quieter colors in the artist's strong composition of two strolling men, one lofting a young boy onto his shoulders (*#8 Three*, from 1990), winningly convey the relaxed body language of a tight-knit family out together on a weekend.



Joel Handorff, "Mary" (1988)

Courtesy BWAC Gallery

Audrey Anastasi similarly delves into relationships. In *Leaving* (1993), a woman sits on the edge of a bathtub, fully clothed and adjusting her beret. The figure is naturalistic but the paint handling is invitingly limber, quick slashes of gray imbuing her forearms with luminous shadows engendered by the sun bouncing around bathroom tiles. A knotted tie is draped over the tub's rim — one of the androgynous accessories of the era that she'll put on as a final touch, or evidence of a relationship she is ending? In 1991's *Balthusian*, a young woman splays herself atop a table, a long coat hanging open to expose her thong and bare legs. She looks frankly at the viewer — who, of course, was initially the artist. The challenge in her stare, as the title informs us, is directed at the painter Balthus and his penchant for painting provocatively posed pubescent girls as being passive and



Suzan Courtney, "Scapegoat" (1993-94)

Courtesy BWAC Gallery

With titles such as *Growth* and *Against All Odds* (both 1995), Fran Winant's contrasting colors and fluttery shapes — basically symmetrical, save for the odd waxy drip — might be insects, or maybe flowers. Or possibly manifestations of the biomorphic machinery that permeated one slice of the zeitgeist from the mid-Eighties on, whether in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* or in *The Terminator* onscreen (both debuted in that auspicious year of 1984). In Winant's imagery, nature is adulterated by forces beyond evolution.

Snarls of rich black paint partially obscure the eponymous blob in Suzan Courtney's *Yellow Shape* (1993–1994), but glimmers of white within the yolk-like form pull a viewer past the bold composition and into an abstract narrative of shifting space. In large oil-stick drawings from the early '90s, fittingly titled *Metamorphosis 1* and *2*, the artist's imaginative forms oscillate between biology and architectonic structures.

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Jean Foos brings a vibrant formal wit to her slathered matrices of paint. *Hudson and Spring* (1995) was perhaps titled for the street intersection in Manhattan, but the mossy flagstone pattern overlaid with a sinuous net of color-shifting strokes conjures the primeval geometries of nature, before humanity segmented the island into a paved grid. Spheres reminiscent of buckyballs seem to hover within a red web in Foos's gorgeous, octagon-shaped canvas *Snowball Sale* (1991). The title made at least this viewer laugh, as he recalled a piece by David Hammons performed near Cooper Union, in 1983, in which the brilliant conceptual artist sold snowballs to passersby from a red-striped blanket stretched out on the sidewalk.

Even if the viewer is wrong about that antecedent, the enthralling visions arising from Hammons's aesthetic jujitsu helped define the most trenchant cultural currents of those years. New York City was in thrall to the spectacle of vulgar consumption practiced by voracious real estate speculators and hedge fund manipulators. At the national level, President Ronald Reagan saw government not as a tool that could solve society's problems but as a cudgel with which to further afflict the afflicted, including those affected by a mysterious illness some were calling "the gay plague."



Richard Hofmann, "Aqua Man" (c. 1985)
Courtesy BWAC Gallery

This official neglect took a high toll on the community of artists, including two painters in this show. Judging from the photo on display, Richard Hofmann (1954–1994) was marquee handsome, but the expressionist figures in his large woodcuts and even bigger paintings all look to have spent plenty of seasons in Hell. Twisted, stretched, crushed, and tortured, these characters give as good as they get, accepting both pain and pleasure as the price of our carnal desires. A sense of youthfully boundless energy emanates from some of the huge canvases here, not surprising coming from an artist who painted murals in such East Village meccas as Danceteria and the Pyramid Club. But it is the small work *Aqua Man* (c. 1985) — which features a Polaroid print of a man's blurry face peering out from a surrounding maelstrom of paint and wax—that crystalizes how an individual soul must always negotiate the hurly-burly of humanity.

Marc Lida didn't make it out of the decade either, but his art exudes a frank freshness. In the acrylic painting on paper *Sex Series* (c. 1985), a pair of entwined men are caressed by a skeleton while a naked figure observes from a brightly lit doorway. Studded with silvery stars and half-moons, the composition delivers Eros and Thanatos to beat the band. In a fatalistically droll watercolor, *Art Dealer at Leisure* (1985), Lida imagines the scene when, in a drug-fueled frenzy, the 57th Street art dealer Andrew Crispo ordered his coked-up chauffeur to shoot a man after an extended bout of sadomasochistic sex. The underling went up the river for 25-to-life, but Crispo, like Al Capone decades before, was sent to prison on a mere tax-evasion rap. Through his title, Lida (1957–1992) allows a wry humor to acknowledge Crispo as an outlier, understanding that most art dealers are merely mercenary as opposed to murderous. Think of Leo Castelli, who, when asked about Andy Warhol's condition as the Pop artist underwent surgery for gunshot wounds, in 1968, replied only, "I'm afraid there are not that many paintings left."

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Stephen Lack, "Calisthenics" (1991)
Courtesy BWAC Gallery

Stephen Lack is another painter undaunted by the dark side, perhaps not unexpected from an artist who early on exhibited in Gracie Mansion's first gallery — the bathroom of her East Village apartment. In one work, Lack depicts a fallen wrestler in slashing pink strokes as bright as neon (*On the Ropes*, 1989); in another, a figure spread-eagled against a wall is menaced by a man whose arm and barely seen face glow as if radioactive (*Calisthenics*, 1991). Lack's ravishing paint handling belies the brutal ambiguities of the scenarios in which his lithe characters find themselves.

Michael Ottersen's abstractions also traverse ambiguous realms — is that an old-school keyhole or a mutant treble clef in the bizarrely titled *Silver (Drool)*, from 1991? Perhaps the variegated blue-green and black bars of the background augur for the first interpretation, but both possibilities are likely wide-of-the-mark whimsies of a particular viewer. Still, the gray and blue biomorphs of 1990's *Throat (Lake)* cry out from a narrative miasma, separated as they are by a metal screen taut as a tennis net. Madder Lake is an ancient color that can be as intense as dried blood and as buoyant as pink roses, both notions easily subsumed by the rich, murky depths of the purplish background.

At first glance, Jane Bauman's paintings on aluminum come across as brash abstractions, as in the roller-coaster-like orange struts placed on a polka-dot ground in 1990's *Chair for Dean*. But even without the title, one might soon comprehend the symmetrical form recalling those sling chairs where canvas is stretched over a curving metal framework to provide a seat and back rest. Bauman's surfaces radiate like sunlight through smog, imparting a tarnished loveliness. More blunt, but equally compelling, are stencils that look, through accumulated layers of spray paint, to have done some serious street duty. One, of a now old-fashioned phone handset hanging from a coiled cord, will make viewers of a certain age laugh, recalling dead pay phones drooping around the city like urban Spanish moss.

A number of the painters here achieved success in those days, and continue to show, sell, and teach today. In the work on display in this sprawling exhibition, you can feel the pulse of that decade, an era overripe with painting.



Jane Bauman, "Green Phone Stencil"
(1983-1990). Courtesy BWAC Gallery

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It was a time when surveys of works by the German artist Anselm Kiefer — paint slathered over woodcuts, straw, or lead sheets, evoking the blasted interiors of Nazi-era buildings or desolate, wintry fields — barnstormed major American museums. And few painters in New York City at the time missed Terry Winters's late-'80s drawing shows at Sonnabend Gallery, or his 1992 Whitney retrospective of paintings that ranged from taxonomies of fungus and seedpods, diamonds and spores, to evocations of dystopic landscapes. Add to that the posthumous exhibitions of Eva Hesse's organic abstractions found up- and downtown, inspiring artists all over the city.

Exhibitions like "Painting to Survive" throw into relief the loam of culture, that dead-fall of late-night studio jags that may blossom into the new and, sometimes, the frighteningly original. Of course painters want to sell scads of their canvases, but the truest ones keep working regardless, and decades after the fact maybe their work will be truly seen.

Which brings us to the final painter in the show, John Bradford, who ignored the era's landscape of neo-expressionism and the later conceptual undulations of the neo-geo movement in favor of intense religious visions. Bradford's vibrant compositions exquisitely balance dramatic figures against large swathes of mottled background colors, imbuing his scenes with a down-to-earth grandeur. In 1994's *The Butchering of Agog*, one man raises a wedged sledgehammer above a kneeling figure, the soon-to-be murderer's robe a checkerboard of



John Bradford, "The Butchering of Agog" (1994)
Courtesy BWAC Gallery

dark and light that heightens the eternal tension of the blow that never falls. This is a painting, so we have time to take in the victim's upraised face, his eyes meeting those of his executioner. The King James Bible reads, "And Samuel said, 'As thy sword hath made women childless, so shall thy mother be childless among women.' And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord." The biblical names don't quite align over the millennia, but the impulse to violent revenge is understood in the darkest reaches of our viscera. It is no small feat to compel a viewer, through roughly brushed pigments, to contemplate just what it means for one human being to kill another, breaking through history's numbing repetition of such acts. Bradford at times paints with a splashy abandon, but rather than expressionist bombast, his energetic brushwork seems a way to leaven the purity of the divine with the messiness of the real world. If I gotta go to church, these would be the paintings I want on the walls.

Overall, this is a powerful show — exuberant and rough, joyful and tragic, it leaves you with mixed emotions. A bit like getting a love tap from a falling two-by-four.

'Painting to Survive: 1985–1995' Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition
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