



D. Domanic Lombardi, *Tattooed Tokyo #4*, 2008. Acrylic on unprimed canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

## RE-DIGESTING KITSCH

Lauren Kaufman

D. Domanic Lombardi's recent exhibition *Toyota vs. Godzilla* at ArtLexis in Brooklyn highlights the alternately political, prosaic, spiritual, and flamboyant methods by which life is experienced in Tokyo and Seoul. The exhibition exploits Lombardi's own fluency in these multifarious forms of discourse, here painting and sculpture. They are the basis for his shrewd and penetrating cultural assessments.

This exhibition is divided into two sections, the first, which examines Lombardi's *Tattooed Tokyo Series*, was inspired by a visit to Tokyo and Seoul last spring, where the artist was struck by how differently and overtly most things were advertised, promoted, or just plain experienced. Endearing figures, cartoony characters, and the obvious popularity of the graphic novel for all ages left a lasting impression on the

*"Lombardi's recent work has evolved from painting to innovative sculpture that is intended to fly in the face of social convention, testing the emotional limits of both the artist and the viewer."*

artist. For the majority of his career Lombardi has blended the concerns and methods of Pop, Conceptual, and appropriation art with craft-making and popular culture to create his own unique iconography, often controversial and always engaging. His work explores contemporary obsessions with everything from sex and desire, race and gender, and celebrity, media, and commerce. For this new series of *Graffoo* paintings, which combines the transgressive approach of graffiti with a tattoo aesthetic, Lombardi placed two characters in a series of situations and settings within the streets, restaurants, and homes of Tokyo to form a narrative. Lombardi's recent work has evolved from painting to innovative sculpture that is intended to fly in the face of social convention, testing the emotional limits of both the artist and the viewer.

The second part of the exhibition featured idiosyncratic sculpture in the form of little-urchins type figures. These figures of mischief are common to all cultures and eras. These

sculptures represent growing concern for the current state of the world, most notably how the poor economy will affect our children's future. The urchin sculptures are composed mostly of sand and acrylic medium, built on an armature of recycled objects, which continues the artist's obsession with reusing discarded materials as part of the art-making process. Using the language and imagery of the all-pervasive American consumer culture he grew up in, his work distorts and mutates the familiar into the disturbing and almost carnivalesque.

The placement of the urchins on books magnifies the narrative aspect of this mischievous subject while the use of recycled objects brings to the fore, the importance of making the most of preexistent resources. Lombardi's artworks rarely inspire moderate responses, and this is one signal of the importance of his achievement. Focusing on some of the most unexpected objects as models for his work, Lombardi eschews typical standards of high art and zeroes in rather precisely on the vulnerabilities of hierarchies and value systems. Much of his art has a delirious, hallucinatory air, as if the artist were trying to transcend both the naïveté of junk feeling and the sophistication of the art world.

Lombardi has created his own brand of kitsch. Countless artists today work with kitsch. It's taken for granted as a subject, as conventional in its way as still life or landscape painting. Kitsch is such a powerful presence in America that, inevitably, artists try to confront and transform it. Their work, like art that depicts a still life or landscape, can be more or less competent, and can embody many different attitudes, from the silly to the sublime. Lombardi's is a razzle-dazzle impresario of the kitsch object, an explorer of clichéd roles and social disguises. His approach to the kitschy illustrates the characteristic strengths—and, at times, the principal weakness—of this tradition. In his best art, Lombardi does something riskier and more paradoxical, entering the spirit of kitsch as if to know it from the inside. He retains, in such work, something youthful or childlike. Powerful, even angry sensations of lost innocence—something not usually attributed to hip and knowing postmodernists—shape the work of Lombardi.

The power within his work is the lack of commitment to any specific style—the intention is to mix different visual languages that both compliment and nullify one another. Crucially it is this swirling inner contradiction that visually shows how successful his work is at dealing with the human condition. Contradiction is Lombardi's way of showing the unavailability of certainty about anything, specifically the human relationships. □



### Signs of the Post-Apocalypse

Jill Conner investigates D. Dominick Lombardi's globs of ink as a new iconography

Pain and anguish find their way into the playful abstractions of D. Dominick Lombardi. Pulling from the vast history of newsprint caricatures and the iconography of tattoos, Lombardi presents an array of abstract, moody forms.

The morose cartoon figure seen in *Death of a Clown* isn't the common cliché of a downtrodden Pierrot. Without feet and partly formless, this clown looks like a zombie. The accompanying sculpture *Death of a Clown (Bust)* features a detail of the acrylic work, and shows the balloon-like brain emerging from the back of the head. *Big Foot* lacks detail in comparison with the first clown piece; it's primarily a lyrical silhouette made with different colors. The figure gradually gives way to abstract form in *Preraphaelite Premie* and *Shrunken Head*.

While these contorted abstractions exude pain, Lombardi's strength does not reside in these small, tragic narratives. The best works in his latest exhibition, "The Post Apocalyptic Tattoo," are the drawings from the vast *Head-series*, each using India ink to form thick, dynamic lines that push and pull into various gestures. These heads are not recognizable as faces—they are crazy, strained knots on the verge of unraveling.

Smashed sponges, torn rags and bloated gloves would be a facile way of reading these odd specimens. But are they anything beyond globs of ink and calligraphic scribbles? The artist claims that his comical abstractions are in fact post-apocalyptic tattoos, part of a process of coming to terms with something greater. Among the jumble of daily iconography, Lombardi's insignias are safe from being lost. □



Top: Amy Yoes, *Sightseers Folklore*, detail, 2005. Bottom: D. Dominick Lombardi, *Death of a Clown*, 1999. Reverse painted, acrylic on Plexiglass, 10 x 8in.





# Artist to Artist: Strange Brew

Alejandra Villasmil and D. Dominick Lombardi



**C**urator Claudio Gonzalez began a visual dialogue between Alejandra Villasmil and D. Dominick Lombardi when he asked them both to exhibit together in his gallery. Both artists write about art as well, so the potential for an interesting linear dialogue between the two was too good to pass up. Here are a few excerpts from a number of online discussions on how the show would look.

**D. Dominick Lombardi:** Hey Alejandra. I'm thinking, after the meeting we had with Claudio, that we will focus the show around four of our larger works. The two I am thinking of, for me, are "Graffoo" paintings: *Tattooed Landscape #23* and *Tattooed Landscape #25*. You know how it is, we always want to show our latest works, and these seem to fit the show's theme. I also like the timidity or vulnerability of my characters against some of the more self-assured elements in your works. Any thoughts?

Alejandra Villasmil: Yes, I was actually thinking that there is an interesting dialogue between your "Graffoo" paintings and my "Escort Ads" and "Dress to Kill" series. In both of my series, the

characters suffer a transformation—from being these professedly menacing beasts to becoming these comical, sometimes ridiculous, entities. The transformation occurs with ornamentation, that is, by making up and disguising these characters found in printed matter. The escorts become sexy, mythological creatures and the medieval beasts become sweet monsters dressed in festive costumes. We do this everyday. We live immersed in the artifice and appearance of the media and of consumer society. Your characters are sort of also byproducts or victims of transformation and of external forces. In these "post-apocalyptic" times, to borrow an expression from you, our characters transmute into amusing, lovely beings.

**DDL:** Absolutely. Your figures have the intricacies to soften them, and mine have the physical disfunctions—both are ways of dressing up the less desirable, so to speak. This is also a way of humanizing such undesirables, or maybe it is about becoming less afraid of the unknown. Is that we are striving for? And also, nothing creeps me out more than what may be in

D. Dominick Lombardi, *Tattooed Landscape #28*, Alkyd and Acrylic on canvas.



store for us in the future—the scariest unknown. But, we can control that fear to a certain extent, we can escape from it in the studio by creating our own world where beasts, or what we might normally see as problematic beings, are represented as compelling or even as mesmerizing. That's the key to your work, I think. It grabs you in the gut, in the subconscious or somewhere in the body or mind, and it keeps you there through the detail or the narrative, or both. And, since my art feeds off the narrative side of things, our work should communicate in many strange new ways.

AV: Yes! That is exactly what we'll do: control our fears by transforming the disturbing reality—and in some cases the unknown—into a pleasant experience.

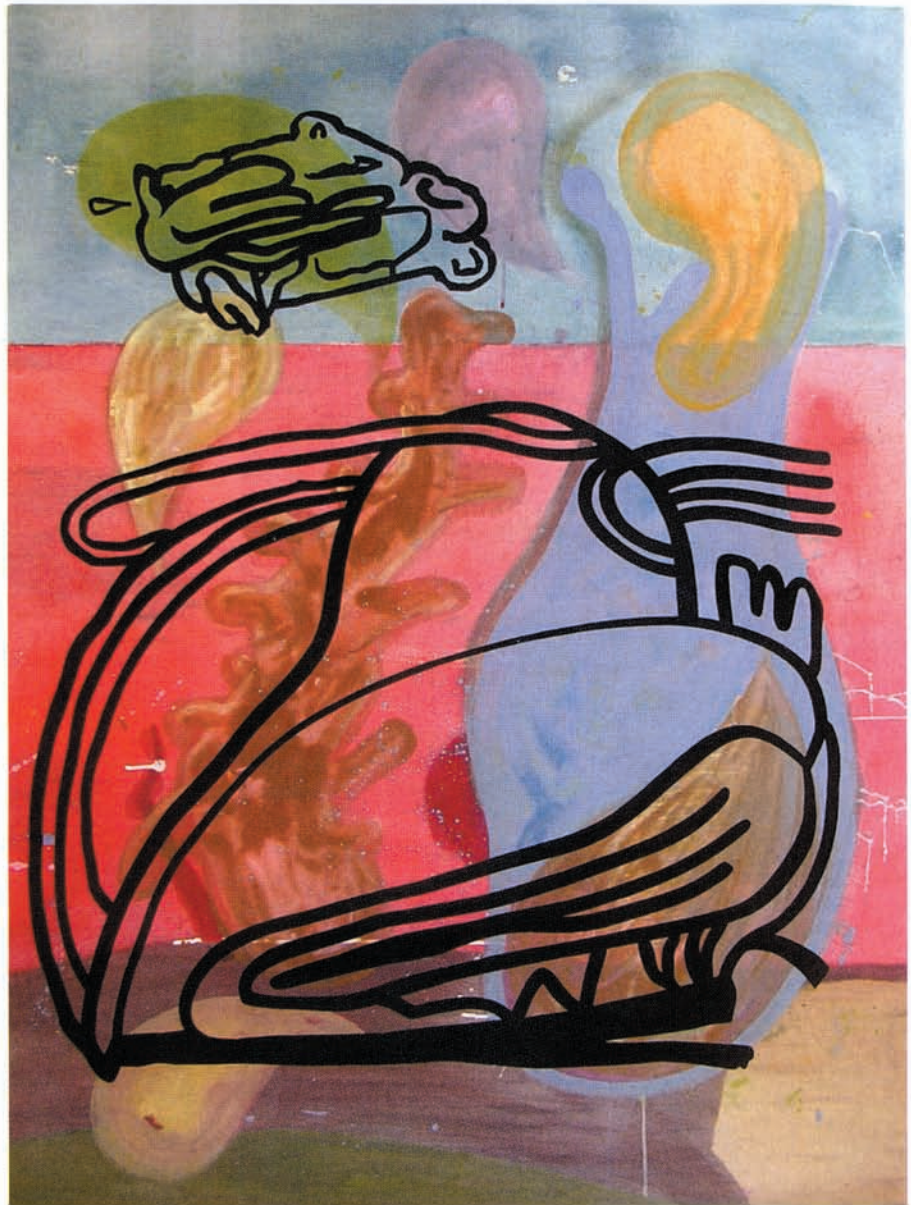
It is like bringing the beauty out of ugly times. We are doing it by decorating, even though that sounds like a superficial gesture. I embellish "Escorts" with fake gems, you tattoo Little Orphan Annie, a comic character with a tragic life. Now, whilst my characters are real characters with a fantasy twist (astronauts, dinosaurs, medieval beasts, escorts),

yours seem to be completely invented. Indeed, you have this family tree of imaginary characters—you call it a "hierarchal society." That is a narrative that most of my work lacks. It is like I create this "photo moment," or frozen frame, and you construct this whole story.

DDL: Actually, the story comes to me as I work on the forms. Early on, in the first 80 or 90 works, I was making reverse paintings (acrylic on Plexiglas). A very time consuming, fastidious process of layering and organizing unmodulated colors—cutting every layer's edge, sometimes as many as four or five layers of paint, with razor blades and Exacto knives and making sure each edge matched up with the previous ones. With all this time immersed in the works, the characters began to become known to me, beyond their appearance. Character traits emerged. And, what looked like gross mutations began to have a purpose, making life more livable, even happy. It may seem strange, but it was like the characters and I had developed a relationship. Actually that is strange, but true.

You hear this from time to time with artists—how characters can come to life. You know that story where Michelangelo supposedly spoke to his sculpture of Moses, demanding that he speak back to him? I even hear, from time to time, that he hammered that Moses statue on the foot as he tried in vain to get him to speak. Anyway, that relationship between the

artist and the subject is easily expanded or extrapolated in an active mind that is burdened by tedious technique. Then there is a collective continuum of creative energy, or thoughts and ideas that pass back and forth through all time, to those who look to or feed off their subconscious. That is where the idea of the *Post Apocalyptic Tattoo* came from. I am making



a conjecture that the images that I am automatically drawing and then painting or sculpting are from that continuum, put there by one or two individuals who are actual people. Only, in this instance, they are future tattoo artists. Weird, sure, but it feels right. That direct connection is gone now. I had it from late 1998 to maybe around 2003 or 2004, so now I move on. I am currently making "Graffoos" as I look back on my personal history as well as onto some of the things that I saw and felt in the environs of a future world. I am completing the narrative settings, you could say. □

Alejandra Villasmil, *Dress to Kill (Take IV)*. Mixed media on paper.





## Groovy

by James Hilger

D. Dominick Lombardi, Tattooed Landscape #8, oil on canvas, 1979-2006.

Hidden right out in the open is a space that is at once living and dying on 11th Avenue. It's a notebook factory, but the notebooks are all gone. The building is scheduled for destruction. Condos have swooped down and taken yet another swatch of metropolitan land in their scaly claws.

But these bungalows of prey wait—perhaps two years, maybe more. The artists saw, electrify, hoist, paint, clean, hammer, rivet, weld, nail, rig, join—they peel the embossed tin off the ceiling of the old factory and hammer it lovingly to the walls of their new kitchen as the wrecking ball is set to swing; a lovely balance.

Inside, there was a group brush painting and a small army of chairs made green under the papery light of two hanging saturnian globes fashioned from disposable plates. Around a corner, half-lit by a square of overhead sky, I saw something huge and wooden in an elevator shaft. The perfect wood floors of heaven, and the gentle bulges of a crab apple are the only ways to describe the dream-like blonde form that I saw. The building is huge and alive, like an elephant lying in a row of cars breathing amidst the Toyotas. It's beautiful to watch.

This is the home of First Run, a space curated by artists Margaret Roleke and Melinda Hackett. "Groovy," First Run's inaugural exhibition, celebrates every bit of the art of Melinda Hackett, D. Dominick Lombardi, Laura Watt, and Joan Wheeler. Melinda Hackett's pictures are petri dishes full of the pathogens that might cause happiness, or at least something that isn't grist for this often-mediocre mill. I can see them in my mind's eye now—full of cartoon lace that learned how to swim in our thoughts. In what can only be called an alchemical mode of painting, D. Dominick Lombardi has learned how to tattoo landscapes, and he shows us this trick over mountain ranges of peacock feathers and energy. In this arresting series, Lombardi superimposes jet-black slices of swiss cheese, tribal body art and snatches of cuneiform language over his previous work in a composition that might have been lifted from the fuse-box of a flying saucer. Laura Watt's paintings sing off the eyes like the jewels worn by jewels. Gentle hues repeat toward God.

Watt says it best herself; "Pattern and color are old strategies for knowledge...I embellish, so that some can wish for austerity." Joan Wheeler's photographs of stiff-furred dogs and gorilla-headed soldiers are perfect for the bedrooms of any of the Adams' children. They are lit by the portion of the mind that still recalls fear for the art sometimes found in the home of distant relatives. Dogs Night Out, features several inebriated, dog-headed card players (one in acid washed jeans, I believe) around a table and in front of a painting of two deer next to a lake. More bizarre, perhaps, is that I found myself trying to guess which stuffed dog was the best card player.



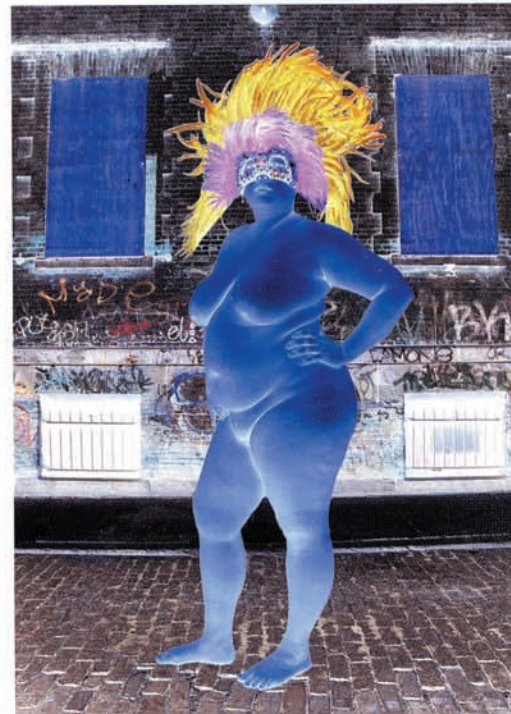
# CIGE

Abraham Lubelski at the Chinese International Gallery Exposition

The China International Gallery Exposition, which took place recently at Beijing's World Trade Center exhibition hall, is only in its second year, but has already doubled in size. The CIGE was "approved" by the China Culture Ministry—a sign that the government is perhaps starting to recognize contemporary art as an engine for economic activity, though perhaps not for social commentary. The majority of the 80 galleries represented at the CIGE, which had the theme of "Internationalization; Standardization and fore heading to the future," were from the Far East, with just a few from Europe. The U.S. representation was rather weak, with only four galleries, but that's bound to change next year.

The atmosphere was not quite as frenetic as the Armory, which has double the number of galleries. And CIGE can't compete economically with the more established international art fairs since China's collector class is undeveloped and geographically dispersed. The Chinese contemporary art market is still in its infant stages, both economically and aesthetically. But the potential is massive, and unlike in the U.S. or Europe, where it took two or three hundred years to develop, in China it could all happen in five years. By then the Chinese art market will be as powerful, if not more so, than in Europe and the U.S.

Next year, CIGE should allocate more space for experimental projects and for installations made specially for the fair, as we saw at this year's Armory. In spite of—or perhaps because of—the Chinese government's history of control and censorship over contemporary art, which may now be changing, there were signs of radical approaches. They sneak in without people realizing that it's happening. This is where the new political and aesthetic visions are going to come from. These pages show a selection of them.



Clockwise, from top left: Winand Staring, *Staring at the Sea*, 2005. Photograph, 70 x 50 cm. / Norma Drimmer, *Nine* (from *Relationships of Beauty* series), 2004. Color c-print on canvas, 120 x 160 cm. / Koh, *Brooklyn*, 2005. Archival color print, 61 x 86 cm. / D. Dominick Lombardi, *Head # 1,030* and *Head # 1,000*, 2004-2005. Ink on rag paper and mixed media wall sculpture, 35.5 x 35.5 and 35.5 x 14 cm.





From left, clockwise: **Zhuang Huan**, *Foam*, from a series of 15 images, 1999. C-print, 101.6 x 68.6 cm / **Zheng Yi**, *Passion's Gone With the Wind*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 195 x 165 cm. / **Li Wei**, *The Life is Aloft It One*, 2004. Photo, 150 x 150 cm / **Pascale Marthine Tayou**, *Colonie de Foulards*, 2004. Iron, head scarves, flags, 1.7 x 11 x 5.5 m.



# NY ARTS

Great Britain £ 8  
Japan ¥ 1,500  
Canada \$ 13.90  
U.S.A. \$ 10.00

Vol.10 no 5/6

[www.nyartsmagazine.com](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com)

## BERLINER KUNST



Lunarbase Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is hosting D. Dominick Lombardi's first one-person exhibition since March of 2003. Lunarbase Gallery Director, Yuko Kawasi-Wyllie has fostered her own stable of mainly Japanese artists working in a distinctively Japanese cartoon-like way called *Characterism*, and Lombardi's work fits very comfortably into this group

**Rodney Dickson:** I am very familiar with your black India ink drawings on paper. These color works, they are acrylic on Plexiglas, correct?

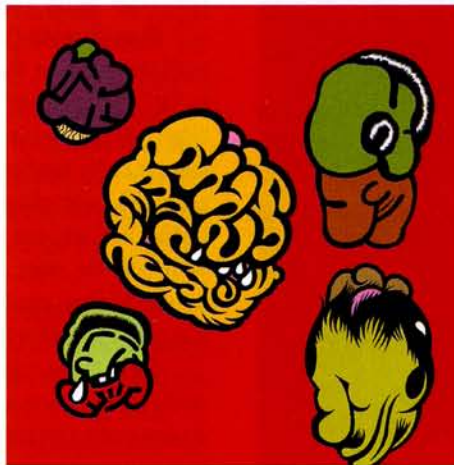
**D. Dominick Lombardi:** Yes. They are reverse painted, acrylic on Plexiglas. It is more difficult to reverse paint, since you are painting from front to back. And with the unmodulated colors I use, you need to have a number of coats so it adds quite a bit of time to the process. This tediousness is best suited for my temperament.

**RD:** You know, one thinks this way naturally, from the line, or the outline, to the color—so I think it sounds like a natural process.

**DDL:** Oh absolutely. I like doing the black line first. Many times, in the traditional way of painting, those first lines, the drawing on the canvas, if

## Artist 2 Artist

Rodney Dickson



you do a drawing first, gets covered over, and you may never get it back. That can be a problem if the quality of the original lines were better in the drawing than they are in the painted edges.

But getting back to the tediousness of the process. That extra time that it takes to make these works, as compared to the time it would take

to paint them in a more traditional, face-on manner does one very important thing for me: It gives me all that extra time, maybe three or four times the amount of time, to look more deeply into the characters I am painting. That is how the overall narrative started. I began to see in the characters, their individual personalities. I began to develop in my mind, little vignettes as the characters would interrelate. I saw them, how they behave, how they would move about, think and respond to certain situations.

You get mesmerized when you are doing something tedious. Your mind breaks free, and you get into this altered state. Then you can pull more easily from your subconscious. That is where all the best ideas are. And that gets into what I believe is this big creative continuum concept, whereby we all, as artists, pull out of and feed back into constantly. The creative continuum is something that has been around forever and will always be, and it is not something that is controlled or divided up by any units of time.

I also believe there can be specific lines or feeds from that creative continuum when you shed the distractions, work with your subconscious.

Continues on [www.nyartsmagazine.com](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com)

Top: Julie Peppito, *Wound*, Mixed Media Installation 2004 / Bottom: D. Dominick Lombardi, *900-K* (2005), ten color silkscreen, 14 X 14 in.

May/June 2005 69

