

CHERYL MCGINNIS

FINE ART

A Contemporary Salon

by Tina Seligman

After looking at a piece of art, have you learned anything about yourself?" asks art dealer Cheryl McGinnis. Her enthusiasm and passion for engaging the collector, viewer and artist in an open dialogue is refreshing and challenging. The warmth of her pre-war upper west side salon in New York also creates an atmosphere of comfort where "art can be experienced as part of life." On September 23, McGinnis will open with new photography by Tony Gonzalez, followed by an equally compelling season with works by Susan Hamburger, Margaret Murphy, Nina Kuo, Tomie Arai, Hu Bing, Zhang Hongtu, Rebecca Riley, April Vollmer, Jessica Houston, Margaret Evangeline and Michael Kirk. "Woven through the diverse works of these artists are intellect, emotion and an overwhelming beauty that inspires continued reflection and heightens our daily experiences to become monumental."

Bathing is one of the most intimate, quiet and relaxed moments of our lives. Undisturbed, we think, we dream, we brush our hair and pamper our bodies with scents. And scrape at our skin with razors. Tony Gonzalez's strikingly beautiful series of female nude "Bathers" approaches a genre popularized in

19th century paintings with an edgy, contemporary sensibility. Working with a 100-year-old painterly process of negatives printed onto rag paper with multiple layers of gum arabic and watercolor, each is unique. This hybrid sensitively expresses fully charged issues about body image and Gonzalez's explorations of the voyeuristic nature of photography. Inspired by painters such as Gustave Courbet, his consistent interest has been to depict the human form "in all its stark realism." Gonzalez's early black and white work focused on photographing friends in the intimacy of their domestic environments. During the 1990s, he had begun to shift to a series of anonymous photographs of bathers at the Jersey Shore, where he had spent much of his youth. Using a Leica camera, he was able to remain inconspicuous while capturing spontaneous uninhibited gestures and touching moments. In his "Bathers" series, Gonzalez has returned to working collaboratively with friends as models in their private settings. "To acknowledge their participation and that each is a distinct, individual woman rather than some idealized 'type,' I use their names within the titles." These images, which are larger and in color, project the beauty of natural women in complete abandon



Margaret Evangeline "Kleifontanano Series #21," 2003, Oil on Aluminum with Gunshot, 22 x 22"

and comfort with themselves, the photographer and the viewer. Are we observing or participating in our own moments? What Gonzalez finds intriguing is that the unplanned poses are unexpectedly reminiscent of his work at the Jersey Shore. McGinnis notes that many of the artists she represents repeat their individual quests in new ways throughout their creative development.

Zhang Hongtu's search for artistic freedom has informed his work since immigrating to the United States from China in 1982. The Cultural Revolution turned art into a political tool rather than a form of expression. By combining Eastern and Western philosophies, pop icons and political imagery, he powerfully balances fresh visual aesthetics with searing commentary, provoking self-reflection with humor, pathos and awe. Using a variety of traditional and non-traditional materials, including soy sauce and tar, Hongtu often mixes dimensions and time periods. In his painting "The Last Banquet," he mocks Mao's god-like stature using a western vocabulary. With a series of Chinese landscapes painted in the style of such 19th century artists as Van Gogh, he combines cultures while referencing the Chinese tradition of copying masters.

Although McGinnis exhibits art produced by men, she is most often drawn to the work being developed by contemporary women. "The original feminists were on the battlefield while this second generation is having a different conversation about acceptance and creating lives that feed their needs. In the past, a woman's home was her art. Many women artists began to employ patterned imagery like textiles and wallpaper in work that was dismissed as craft, but these textures were part of their everyday lives." Margaret Murphy's delightful paintings utilize ornamental elements and objects to explore "the idea of authenticity and material culture. The blurring of distinctions between what is 'real' and what is 'fake' is a visual and conceptual dilemma," that she continues to investigate. Susan Hamburger reveals a different view of the decorative arts in voluptuous, Baroque-like "Truss" paintings of curtains with tense, twisted tiebacks. This series led to "Modular" paintings that fragment interiors, examining spatial relationships of art and furniture. The objects then became tangible with installations of period furniture and wainscoting with plates constructed from archival foamboard. Hamburger's finely hand-drawn ink designs of contemporary



Tony Gonzalez, "Jaclyn/curtain" 2005, Gum Bichromate Print on Watercolor Paper, 11 1/2 x 16"

images on the plates evoke nostalgia and memory, yet with a strong presence that brings the viewer into the present.

Cell phones, hair dryers, astronaut gear and other pop culture props are sported by clay "tomb" sculptures, luminous paintings and animated videos of female Tang and Han Dynasty figures created by Chinese-American artist Nina Kuo. Potent and amusing, these cross-cultural images of women pay tribute while questioning how to resolve anachronistic ancestral histories with futuristic life. Third-generation Japanese-American painter and printmaker, Tomie Arai, comments about women's lives in relation to emigration with repeated images of dragonflies, teapots and boats. Her past installations have included a wall-sized book of panels that traced the stories of several blended immigrant families. Mixed media glass installations by Chinese artist Hu Bing address current concerns through a variety of imagery, including a provocative piece entitled "Pregnant and Aborted."

What McGinnis finds most fascinating is that many women are now exploring "microspace" by incorporating scientific material into their work. Rebecca Riley's recent breathtaking paintings conceptualize space as affected by the mass around it on a cellular, atomic and subatomic level. Riley also explores the indefinable mysteries of the Big Bang. Printmaker April Vollmer, who sees cyberspace as akin to printmaking, combines biology, botany, entomology, architecture and space into enchanting and complex contemplative mandalas, using both traditional 17th Century Japanese Hanga woodblock techniques and digital manipulation. In her Renaissance-like approach, Vollmer describes this process as a contemporary form of alchemy. "In my work I contrast the organic shapes of nature with the logical grid of culture. I find similarities in shape between plant, animal and the human body. The veins in a leaf, in an insect's wing and in my own hand reflect the same physical principles. These correspondences help me locate myself in space and time, and measure my connection to nature." Jessica Houston's stimulating, painterly images of swimmers examine organic relationships of skin, pulse and breathing to natural and chlorinated water.

With the rise of brutality in the world, Margaret Evangeline's visceral reaction to the violence of 9/11 was to travel to New Mexico, where she began shooting at aluminum and other metals. "This very aggressive action empowered Margaret," notes McGinnis. "The bullet holes create such beautiful, sculptural openings and her addition of auto body paint enhances those shapes. As an example of how artist-collector relationships can affect the process, an elderly female client had purchased one of these pieces and placed it against her antique hand-painted wallpaper. Margaret was concerned about ruining the wallpaper, but was intrigued and began to create wallpaper designs with auto paint as part of her pieces."

McGinnis' vision has extended to outside institutions as guest curator. At her extraordinary interactive exhibition, "Through Kids' Eyes," at Flushing Town Hall, a Smithsonian Institution Affiliate in Queens, New York, children rushed to touch and experience the artwork as the adults tentatively watched. "The adults then gradually approached the work with less inhibition. The concept was inspired by observations of my six-year-old son and his friend painting together in my apartment. They were so focused - they approach art in such a pure, sensory way that most grown-ups have forgotten." Among the works displayed, Michael Kirk's expressive charcoal drawings of trees traced environmental changes. Catya Plate's installations combined traditional figurative painting and scientific study with a mixture of unexpected sundry materials that allowed viewers to smell, touch and become aware of their own heartbeats. The most unique and active aspect of this exhibit was McGinnis' own installations, which encouraged both children and adults to create their own art. The "Tape Room," a small alcove with walls and floor covered with drawing paper, offered a basket of colored tape to tickle and tap the imagination. Several mothers concluded that every home should have a "tape room."

McGinnis brings wonder, curiosity, skepticism, vitality and delight to all of her exhibitions, "Art is so powerful...it enhances my life and I want to share this experience." McGinnis believes that "an art collection is a diary or map of your life. Each piece that you acquire tells you about who you are and contributes to who you are becoming." Her exhibits, which last from three to four weeks, are open to the public on weekends, and during the week by appointment. Cheryl McGinnis welcomes inquiries and can be contacted at 212-579-8485. Her gallery is located at 215 West 88th Street. ♦

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