

SIGNAL | SIGNAL

RECENT WORKS BY

COLBY CALDWELL | JASON GUBBIOTTI | JAMES HUCKENPAHLER

TEXTS BY

JESSICA DAWSON | JAMES MAHONEY | BERNARD WELT

COLBY CALDWELL is currently, but not exclusively, enjoying himself. He is a member of the faculty of the Corcoran College of Art and Design, teaching in both the Fine Art and photography Departments. His work has been exhibited in Madrid, Basel, Houston, and Philadelphia. Recent projects include a commission for AT&T Wireless in Los Angeles and a video entitled “Ordinary Eternal Machinery” in collaboration with Bernard Welt. He is represented by Hemphill Fine Arts, where his most recent effort, “Groundwork,” was exhibited in Fall ‘99. Chosen by *Washingtonian* magazine as one of the hundred Washingtonians to watch in 2000, he might very well be watching you.

JESSICA DAWSON is a freelance arts writer based in Washington, DC. Her work appears in *Washington City Paper*, *New Art Examiner*, and *Interview*. She recently contributed the “Museums and Galleries” chapter to the *Time Out Guide to Washington*.

JASON GUBBIOTTI moved to Washington, DC in 1994 to attend the Corcoran College of Art and Design. While there, he served as President of the Student Council and was the student representative on the Board of Overseers. During the summer of 1997, Gubbiotti studied at the Vermont Studio Center with

Jake Berthot. In 1998, he received a BFA from the Corcoran and has since shown with Troyer Fitzpatrick Lasserma Gallery, WPA\C, and the Corcoran Museum of Art.

JAMES HUCKENPAHLER is currently serving on the WPA\Corcoran Advisory Board. In collaboration with Casey Smith, he will be curating “Index,” an exhibition examining the intersection of art and technology, scheduled for the summer of 2000 at the Corcoran Museum of Art’s Hemicycle gallery. When his schedule permits, he is the Creative Director for Keymind, Inc., a Falls Church, VA web development company that specializes in e-commerce solutions.

JAMES MAHONEY is a Washington, DC-based artist, critic, independent curator, and a contributing editor to *New Art Examiner*. His most recent article, “The Capital of Nostalgia,” explores the aftermath of the Washington Color School.

BERNARD WELT is the author of two books of poetry and of *Mythomania: Fantasies, Fables, and Sheer Lies in Contemporary American Popular Art*. His most recent publication is “A Reply to My Critics” in *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He teaches at the Corcoran College of Art and Design.

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AN EXHIBITION AT

TROYER GALLERY

MAY CONTAIN NATURAL
AND ARTIFICIAL FLAVORS

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MAY CONTAIN NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL FLAVORS

JESSICA DAWSON

ual waxing and buffing of his finished prints. For James Huckenpahler, it takes just the right sequence of mouse clicks to create his works on paper, yet his images' artificial construction doesn't erase their humanity: he borrows from a family tradition that's over a century old to explore issues of identity and belonging. As we watch these three artists negotiate the boundaries between man and his machines, we see conflicts particular to our own time taking shape before us.

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Jason Gubbiotti mounts three sets of rickety stairs to reach his tiny, 200-square-foot studio on F Street in Washington's downtown gallery district. This block of 19th-century storefronts, one of the last of its kind in downtown DC, makes an apt home for a painter whose work is both traditional and contemporary: the old-fashioned atelier positions Gubbiotti on the art-historical continuum; its location installs him in the thick of present-day urban action.

Gubbiotti's painting process is both methodical and time-consuming: After coating gesso on a 3/4-inch wooden support, the artist applies a coat of oil so thick the paint laps off the edges and dries there, suspended in mid-drip. Then the panel hibernates. Sometimes weeks pass

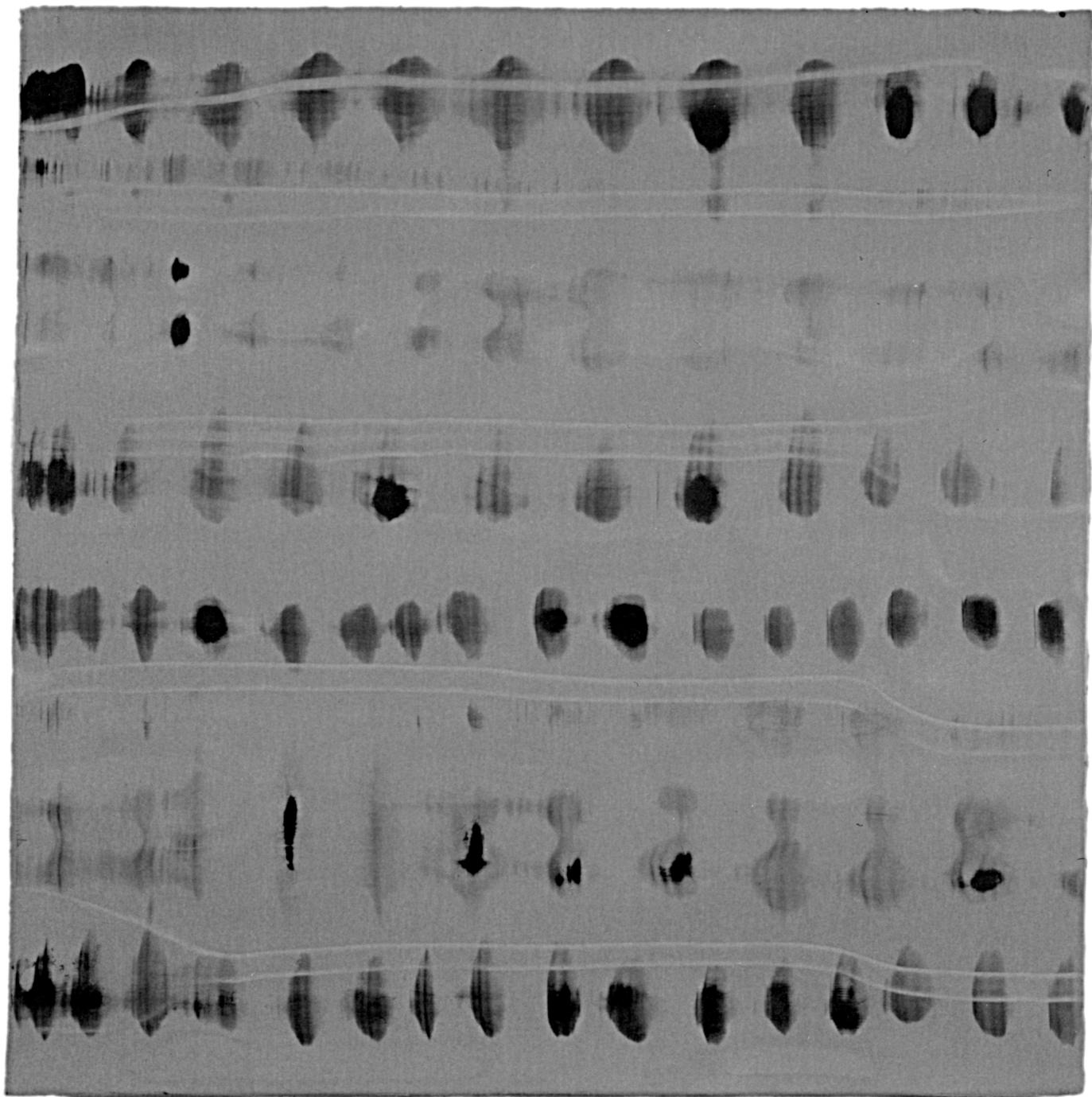
between the initial application of color and the day a second layer of paint is laid down: Drip-thick layer upon drip-thick layer takes time to dry. When he returns to the panel to put down another layer of paint — maybe acid lime, dark olive, or ice blue — he uses various tools while the oil is still wet and skims off the top layer of paint — here, there, not there — exposing horizontal bands of color below.

Gubbiotti paints and skims and paints again until the layers are deep and varied. The result, Gubbiotti will tell you, is unique to each painting's palette: "They're environments," the artist says of his paintings. "Each has its own ecosystem and temperature." Growing up, Gubbiotti spent a lot of time sailing Rhode Island's Point Judith Pond and his memories of those childhood voyages inform his cool blue pieces, which can be read as fluid landscapes. But at the end, they're about experience, not narrative. As the artist says, "It's not a painting of water, but the experience of water."

But something mechanical hums just below these surfaces. Gubbiotti likens it to code, or to information passing. "They resemble pulses skipping by or ripples of water," the painter says, "yet they allude to a computer printer's scan lines." The horizontal bands of data are distributed from left to right, as if motor-driven.

4

Nowadays, artists have their pick of tools to make art. They can do it the old-fashioned way — touch brush to canvas, dodge light in the darkroom — or, with a computer and a few keyboard pecks, transform idea into image almost instantaneously. Regardless of whether the artist's process is newfangled or old school, his work will manifest the tensions between the two: work that takes weeks to create can have the flash of the immediate, just as timeless themes can be explored using up-to-the-minute technology. Painter Jason Gubbiotti spends weeks making his panels, but they resonate with a click and buzz of modern communication that belies the artist's time-consuming creative process. Photographer Colby Caldwell incorporates digital Iris technology into his production repertoire, but he closes the distance between art and artist created by computers through the rit-



But even the buzz of modernity can't obscure the messages from nature: When we follow those data lines to the panel's edge and peek over the side, we're faced again with the thick, fossilized paint drips accumulating just over the panel's edge. These are signals sent from nature.

—

A couple doors down F street from Gubbiotti's studio building, just above Scott's Beauty and Barber Supply, photographer Colby Caldwell jostles a black and white photograph around a pan of bleach. It's a hazy, black and white image of a man with arms upstretched in a gesture of surrender. As the bleach eats away the silver, the ghost of the pixelated TV screen from which the images was shot fades into a criss-cross texture that looks almost like canvas.

"Bleach uncovers details in areas that became too black or too dense. It reveals what's already there," Caldwell says, explaining that he ceaselessly experiments with bleach and toner to make a finished print. "I'm like a chef," the photographer says as he raises one arm and then the other, as if pouring phantom chemicals into his pan.

6 In the darkroom, Caldwell prints like a jazz riff: all improvisation and rhythm, with impromptu manipulations of translucent paper or cloth. That kind of physical action — pouring, rocking, running hands under the light during exposures — is essential to Caldwell's communion with his work.

Caldwell has incorporated touch and action into his color prints, too, even though the Iris process doesn't allow for manipulation during printing. Caldwell reclaims the distance that digital printing creates between artist and artwork when he rubs each print — just as he does with his black and white images — with beeswax. He dips bare hands into wax and rubs

rhythmic circles across the image. "I'm much more in tune with the work when I wax the color prints," he says.

The images Caldwell uses are often borrowed from WWII-era films, books, or his grandfather's hunting films — but wrung of their original meanings through manipulations on the computer or in the darkroom. To Caldwell, even an accidental leak of light into his grandfather's movie camera holds a message from his ancestors. To the rest of us, the work offers a meditative place where we can step inside, walk around, and stretch our legs. Whether it's the artist's vibrant color or moody black and white photographs, no original is without influences from the past, and no part of the past is so distant we can't trace its lineage to ourselves. Caldwell's photographs are communiqués from the past sent through video wires, arriving in new, Iris-print packages.

—

Miles uptown, in a white-walled studio apartment in a former schoolhouse, artist James Huckenpahler's eyes are intent on his monitor. Computer equipment stands shoulder to shoulder in one corner; steel flat-file cabinets dot the room as makeshift coffee tables.

This is no 19th-century garret. It's a new kind artist's studio, where ideas are translated immediately into image with unparalleled economy of action: a palm cradles the mouse, a finger taps the keyboard, and an image emerges.

Each image Huckenpahler creates is built from scratch using Photoshop and third-party software. Textures are generated through a sequence of commands; each step involves the manipulation of variables: "I fill in some parameters, hit 'OK,' and the texture evolves into its next form," the artist explains. Then he's on to the next step in the process. "The textures get built

up procedurally," he says. Images evolve through a series of transformations. Discovering the right sequence of mouse clicks comes after weeks or months of trial and error.

Huckenpahler may have traded in the palette knife for a UMAX S900 with 256MB ram, but his themes emerge from familiar places. A few years back, Huckenpahler came across some old tailors' trade magazines that had belonged to his grandfather's grandfather, a District tailor at the end of the 19th century. Huckenpahler's recent work borrows ideas from the tailor's templates just as Caldwell borrows from his grandfather's hunting video. Both reinterpret information passed down the family line.

But Huckenpahler's templates aren't Butterick patterns: They're made of skin-like membranes and oddly misshapen. Most don't look like you could wear them — nor would you want to. There's a sweater for an armless man. A sleeveless sheath for a pudgy matron. With titles alluding to mercantilism and consumption — "Moneybelt" or "Value in \$US" — the works suggest identity might be bought as easily as a snappy new dress. But fabrics built of skin, a texture unique to the individual, refute that very notion.

The textures Huckenpahler so laboriously creates are the meat of his work. The pink flesh, with its ridges and ravines, is so vast when stretched out across a tailor's template that it becomes an expansive, wind-pocked desert. Out of a language of number and code arises a vast expanse of landscape, confirming that nature and artifice -- like man and machine -- are two parts of the same whole. ■



CALENDAR

BERNARD WELT

1

Why shouldn't one day be much like another, after all?

2

"A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original (Resemblance): the mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an inquiry or discourse concerning the others (Contiguity): and if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it (Cause and Effect)."

—Hume,

An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding

3

At times I imagined my body as a close friend who accompanied me everywhere but whose judgment could not be trusted.

4

What do you see when you close your eyes? That at least is one kind of image that isn't socially constructed. That isn't what most people mean by "image," but it's just what images really *are*: what you see with your eyes closed, only with your eyes open.

5

Just as an exercise, turn your clothes inside out and wear them that way all day.

6

Just as an exercise, turn your body inside out and wear it that way all day.

7

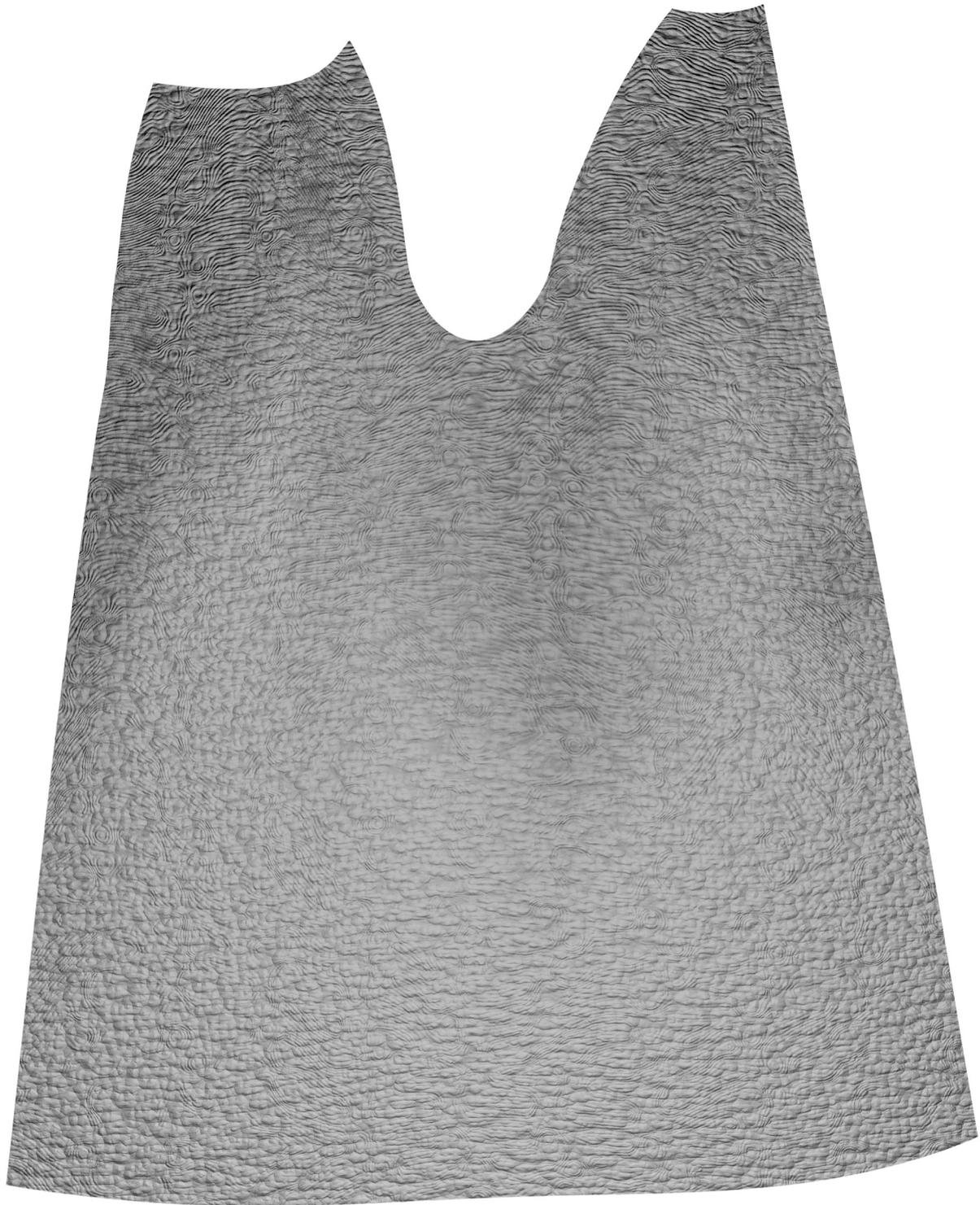
"Be here now" was kind of a joke in my high school. For years I liked the idea of "being" in the present moment without thinking much about it. Now I ask myself, Why this moment, particularly, of all others? Why not this one, for example? Or this? Or this?

8

William Roughead says at the start of his account of the career of Burke and Hare, the infamous body-snatchers of Edinburgh, that he happens to have a square inch of Burke's anatomized flesh before him on the desk as he writes. Did it make him feel closer to the subject? Did it seem impolite?

9

It's not ironic that our system of dating starts with an event no one can possibly establish an exact date for, it makes perfect sense. Isn't the whole point of Jesus' birth to turn an endless, formless one-damn-thing-after-another kind of eternity into a concept you can sink your egotistic teeth into, namely a single person's lifetime? In which case maybe it isn't Jesus' birthday that matters but yours. Otherwise don't you think he'd be getting the presents on Christmas instead of you?



10
Maybe other animals can make art but only human beings can represent days as little boxes.

11
The conscious experience of consciousness. The conscious experience of the conscious experience of consciousness. The conscious experience of the conscious experience of the conscious experience of consciousness.

Well, that's where I get off.

12
Most fascinating, beautiful, and desirable part of your body: the air you're breathing.

13
It's better to have loved and lost
Than loved and not lost
Or lost and lost and lost or something

14
"The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns."
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Also *Star Trek VI*.

15
Try to find a way to literally tie everything in the world together.

In time as well as space, by the way.

I forgot to mention it's much easier if you do this inside your head.

16
Really I'm listening and I understand what you're saying but lately I find that it's only by being totally distracted that I get any perspective on things.

17
The days are just little empty boxes as if enclosing them in four right angles could force them

to mean something and the weeks are rows of boxes and the months are rows of rows and the years are pages and pages of rows of rows of boxes and when they're done with you throw them out if you know what's good for you because if you hang on to them they start to pile up and sooner or later you find you have to store them in the attic and that means hanging out in grocery stores and hassling all your friends looking for the most sought-after commodity in consumer capitalism which is apparently empty boxes.

18
"Yes, yes, I get it, the world ends at midnight. So?"

19
More than anything else I just want to be able to look at certain parts of your body, though not the ones you'd probably guess.

20
I'm glad the Egyptians or Chinese or whoever invented paper and all but feeling kind of wistful about recognizing I'll never see the words I'm writing inscribed on the hide of a dead animal.

21
Why "Say it with flowers?" Why not "Say it with a linoleum-cutter, styrofoam, discarded toy parts, chicken-wire and a nearly empty can of turpentine"?

22
My favorite kind of writing: looks like it makes sense but it doesn't. Also I like when it looks like it doesn't make sense but it does. Well, actually, maybe I like that better.

23
Something not exactly white that conveys the idea of whiteness something really pretty tame intended to represent wildness something encountered for the first time that creates the

impression of having been remembered something that says comfort without actually being comfortable

24
What is the use of memory? Literally.

25
On the other side of time the far side of the future the distant past now indivisible

26
"Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old?"
Keats, "Sleep and Poetry"

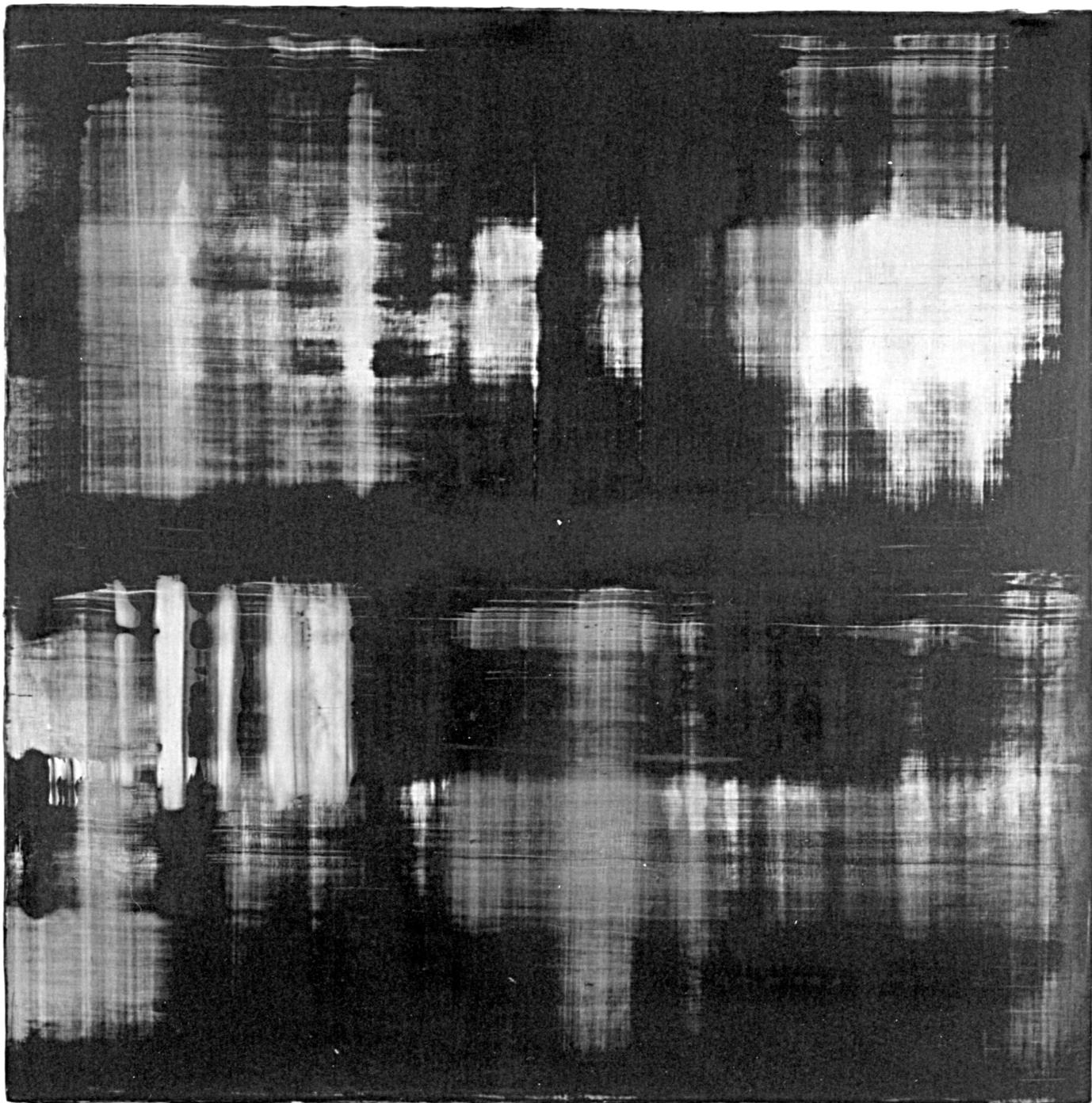
27
Next time you're at a gallery opening, observe the attitude people take toward the food. It represents the only chance most of them have of making sure there's something interesting, valuable, and attractive inside them.

28
Just for today: Let your mind do the work for a change.

29
A beautiful day: that is, a day all of whose parts are in working order.

30
Nobody knows when history started but everyone knows when it ends: right now.

31
Does a calendar explain what days are? Am I my body? Are pictures life? ■



12



Jason Gubbiotti: liminal perspective



IN THE MILLENNIAL WIND

JAMES MAHONEY

It is assumed that art is made by artists, rather than the other way around. These days, though, I'm not so sure about that. The art being generated around the turn of the Millennium has got a strange imperative about it, as if it were being somehow impelled by a strong and sometimes contrary wind. So much seems to be standing on a threshold, culturally, that it makes great sense to begin this next thousand years in an exhibition of three artists whose work is deeply about peripheral phenomena, the rapid, the fleeting, the barely-glimpsed, the micro- or macroscopic. And, more than anything else, about the *liminal* — the shoreline, the transformative edges.

An immediate experience of the paintings of Jason Gubbiotti, the photographs of Colby Caldwell, and the computer-generated imagery of James Huckenpahler offers a vertiable carnival of ephemera: photographs of film stills, grainy and rich in private melancholy but fairly narratively indecipherable, paintings of flows of paint that seem to move at very high speed, images of a metallic skin, sometimes like a person's, sometimes maybe an iguana's, in peculiar, vaguely familiar shapes. These are surfaces, not depths, but they recall an old kabbalistic injunction: as above, so below. All this fugitive data is generated by something heavier, more intentional; so great, in fact, that it's best looked at indi-

rectly, through almost closed eyelids. Analyzed through tissue samples, not taken on as a full body whose presence is so overwhelming that it can't be assimilated. Like, say, time.

James Huckenpahler's skins are set in tailor's patterns, echoing J.G. Ballard's definition of fashion: ". . . a recognition that nature has endowed us with one skin too few, and that a fully sentient being should wear its nervous system externally." These images are in fact so fiercely thin that they exemplify sensual sensitivity itself. Their unexpected, uninvited intimacies are so present to us that they invite an unlimited visual inquiry. This feels like evidence, not self-expression, and the wonder that their formal qualities invoke is as genuine, as impossibly tactile as a friend's wife's naked breast.

The paintings of Jason Gubbiotti are, as he says himself, more about temperature and velocity than they are about form. Sure, abstract painting has occasionally represented movement, but such movement as Futurism embodied was that of the visible world. What Jason Gubbiotti is doing has much less to do with phenomena than it does with noumena, with the speed and qualities of thought itself. These are resolutely non-static expressions of fluid activity, and it is impossible not to assign their shapes dramatic



qualities, their colors heat or cold, their textures the results of natural changes wrought by water, wind, pressure. Colby Caldwell's photographs represent one of the most radically personal uses to which the photographic method has been submitted. His images are explicit recordings of the kind of data that exists centrally as memory: a soft-focus capture of a piece of former reality whose original recording medium was a home movie, a private act of reifying an entirely individual history. Their aura is elegiac, a scene irretrievably lost as a direct result of the presence of the temporal. Photography always depicts the past, but Colby Caldwell's evocation of how quickly time transforms experience is unsettlingly, immediately real.

Here at the beginning of a new century, there is an entirely understandable tendency to believe in limitless newness, which carries in its boundless world a kind of offhand disregard of anything that's identifiably and certainly of the past. The Washington Color School is one of those ideas in contemporary Washington art that raises shrugs, fairly often. But sometimes a powerful waterfall that emerges from a mountainside is preceded by an equally beautiful waterfall farther away, higher up the mountain. The Color School established for Washington an ideal of freedom both from the imperatives of New York fashion and a resonant freedom to develop an unbounded set of aesthetic languages. The Color School didn't release a Babel, however; the symbolic speech in Washington art has been the result of a lot of intelligent research, however intuitively it has proceeded, for the last 40 years. These three Washington artists possess the same kind of radical clarity about their own work that any Color School artist demonstrated about his or her own: these are new orders of seeing. And also flagrantly unexpected investigations. But as Colby Caldwell has said, "Closer investigation can cast new light." So it does.

—

One of the techniques for entering wider realities that Carlos Castaneda's teacher Don Juan devised for him was crossing his eyes, then looking at the special data in the empty space between them, and the heightened visual perceptions on the periphery of vision on both sides. It's a strange experience, as looking at the pieces in this show must be. The data is oddly coded, the language obscure, maybe a bit too fast, in a way. Closer investigation will cast new light, however, and that idea's very deep in the significance of this exhibition. Its earlier title was "Smart Matter," an idea which suggests how awake these artists sense that even material reality already is.

New light's very much self-renewing, in art. Think of Vermeer, a painting of a woman sitting at a writing desk by a window, a woman who's been dead for at least 300 years. There was a day in which this image was fully contemporary, let's say, in August 1665, the day the artist finished it. We still sense the ghost of that edge, in Vermeer, the liminal zone in which, no matter what aesthetic languages are in use, some invisible shoreline has been touched past, and what's beyond is rich with the unknown. These three artists know about that region, and visit it often.

It's what culture requires artists to do — finding a way to present what they find in the unknown in such a way that the rest of us can look at it and somehow take it in. What Jason Gubbiotti, James Huckenpahler, and Colby Caldwell are showing us are nuances, sensations of a hugeness in the world, something of infinite velocity and multiple qualities of form, and a cognizance of countless centuries. Infinities in a grain of sand, eternities in an hour . . . ■



18



Colby Caldwell: captured in the last millennium

Plates:

page 5

Jason Gubbiotti
Innocent Mischief, 1999,
Oil on wood panel, 24" * 24"

page 7

Colby Caldwell
Untitled, no. 97, 1999,
from the "Groundwork" series,
Uniquely toned and waxed silver gelatin print
mounted on wood panel, 19.5" * 21"

page 9

James Huckenpahler
Value in \$US, 1999,
Iris print, 24" * 36"

page 11

Jason Gubbiotti
Observation Machine, 1999,
Oil on wood panel, 24" * 24"

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James Huckenpahler
Alpha Soixante, 1999,
Iris print, 24" * 36"

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Colby Caldwell
Untitled, no. 99, 1999,
Uniquely toned and waxed silver gelatin print
mounted on wood panel, 30.5" * 39.5"

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