

KAREN WILKIN

At the Galleries

IT'S PROBABLY TOO SOON TO ANNOUNCE A TREND, but there are faint indications that the art world's infatuation with unripened talent may be waning. The past season included notable shows by mature New York artists with respectable exhibition histories: among them, works on paper and canvas by Graham Nickson, sculpture by Peter Reginato, and drawings and paintings by Nicolas Carone. These seasoned painters and sculptors have enough mileage on them and have been showing long enough for their distinctive voices to be layered both by their own accumulated experience and by our accumulated experience of their work over time—all of which added to the considerable pleasure of their various shows.

Graham Nickson's exhibition "Italian Skies," at Jill Newhouse Gallery, literally bridged past and present by bringing together a handful of small paintings dating from the early 1970s, when the artist was a youthful Rome Prize winner at the British Academy, and a substantial group of watercolors made between 2004 and 2008, during his later sojourns in Tuscany and Umbria. The watercolors were part of an ongoing series of sunrise and sunset paintings, made almost daily in response to the changing phenomena of the natural world. The loaded subject matter is a deliberate choice. Nickson revels in the challenge of taking nature at her most dramatic and overtly beautiful as his starting point, wrestling with imagery that could easily become trite or sentimental and forcing it into unexpectedness, rigor, and invention.

In the watercolors, Nickson conjured up a wholly contemporary immediacy from subjects usually associated with nineteenth-century Romanticism and elicited an astonishing intensity from a medium usually associated with transparency and delicacy. His luminous sunrises and sunsets were riots of full-bore apricots, oranges, purples, golds, and weird blue-greens; the cool, dark snatches of landscape below the explosions of color in the heavens—silhouetted hills, minimalist rows of trees, suggestions of architecture—were soaked in bottomless blues and violets, and inky off-blacks. Nickson's Italian watercolors immediately evoke specific places, times of day, and seasons, but this powerful sense of the particular is achieved through abstraction. There's nothing literal about his pared-down forms and shapes; his gorgeous hues have nothing to do with local color. His paintings are potent metaphors that make visible the invisible: mood, temperature, smells, depths of feeling, and all the myriad associations that familiar locations call up in us.

The Hudson Review
Vol. LXII, No. 3
(Autumn 2009)

The small canvases from the 1970s, which are among Nickson's earliest wholly personal works, could be seen as announcing his enduring fascination with quattrocento painting—the cool, disciplined geometry of Piero della Francesca and Paolo Ucello, for example—at the same time that they appeared to anticipate the economy, ferocity, and ambition of the later pictures. Inspired by the intimately-scaled predella panels of Renaissance altarpieces, which expand the narrative of the larger central panels, the young Nickson strove to co-opt their formal austerity and coloristic richness to forthright, but often fragmented, images of his daily environment. As he would decades later, in his watercolors, he chose equivocal subjects—the corner of a red clay tennis court, partly obscured by a flowering tree; a rainbow over Roman rooftops; a cupola against low hills—flirting with images that risked being overly picturesque or just plain touristic, transforming them (without recourse to irony) by his lean, geometric compositions and startlingly orchestrated hues.

Confronted by Nickson's works at Newhouse, I kept thinking of Arthur Dove, whose richly hued, economical, pioneering abstractions were similarly rooted in observed actuality. Like Dove, Nickson distills the unstable complexities of nature into lucid, inevitable-seeming structures of shape and color. In the works at Newhouse, with the clear vision of hindsight, we could see the origins of this approach in the small canvases from the 1970s. These early works remain impressive (as do Nickson's large paintings of the same period, his "main altarpieces," not included in "Italian Skies"), but the recent watercolors were evidence that the talented young Rome Prize winner has amply fulfilled the abundant promise of his early years.

Peter Reginato, like his contemporary Nickson, began exhibiting in the early 1970s. "Steel Drawings," Reginato's show of recent work at Heidi Cho Gallery, both summed up his preoccupations of the past few decades and moved into fresh territory. "Steel Drawings" was dominated by two sprawling, arching constructions, typically "Reginato" in their evocation of landscape forms with loose-limbed drawing and exuberant shapes. *Ghost*, 2009, nearly seven feet high, was a spare improvisation of slender bars that diagrammed and caged chunks of space while casually framing a "now you see it, now you don't" sheet of clear Plexiglas, pierced with a giant "thumb hole," like an oversized palette. Reginato's overscaled steel loops and ovals simultaneously suggested tropical vegetation, cartoon animals, machinery, and a host of other, equally wide-ranging things. Furiously scribbled images—part philodendron, part bunny, part scaffolding—seemed to be taking shape as we watched but never coalesced. *Ghost* insisted that we rush through it. I suspect that was because of the transparency of the piece—*Ghost* is almost pure outline; our eyes raced along the paths described by Reginato's generous "drawing," leaping over the spaces described by his wonky shapes and zipping past the angles of his open forms, as we restlessly circled the sculpture, seeking fresh viewpoints.

The denser and shorter of the large sculptures, *Slow Burn*, 2008—five and a half feet tall and crowned with an openwork “box”—seemed to heave itself up into its mound-like shape, like a yoga adept working against the pull of gravity, weighted by its freight of solid, cutout shapes, substantial bars, and pleated forms. I was even more engaged by the shifting opacities of *Slow Burn* than by the assured, more easily grasped openness of *Ghost*, forced to change my viewing pace from speed-reading to leisurely contemplation, in order to enjoy the contrasts between *Slow Burn*'s suave biomorphic planes and boldly drawn angular grids. Perhaps because *Slow Burn* revealed itself more slowly than *Ghost*—of necessity, since we couldn't easily see through it—I found it more surprising. My enthusiasm for Reginato's denser work was confirmed by two smaller, tightly packed sculptures, especially the unpredictable *Frostie's Boot*, which kept shifting scales between improvised architecture, grotesque footwear, and pure sculptural invention. Think squashed Frank Stella, from the period of his most aggressively layered relief paintings. But Reginato's vocabulary of shapes, which he has developed over several decades, owes nothing to Stella's derivations from drafting instruments. Rather, Reginato seems preternaturally alert to American vernacular imagery of the 1950s: outdoor signage, kidney-shaped swimming pools, cartoon conventions, streamlining, George Nelson designs, and even the swoops of tail-finned cars.

For years, Reginato emphasized the street-smart, playful aspect of his work by differentiating the parts of his sculptures with color. But recently, he has exploited the tension between the subtle modulations of unpainted stainless steel and the staccato rhythms of his ambiguous shapes. As a result, his sculptures seem more complex; since the internal orchestration of parts isn't spelled out by color changes, we're obliged to look harder to understand what's going on. When we looked hard at the works in “Steel Drawings,” we discovered that they were among Reginato's strongest, most inventive works to date. He keeps getting better with time.

At ninety-two, Nicolas Carone is almost old enough to be Nickson's and Reginato's grandfather, but his concurrent exhibitions of (mostly) recent drawings at Lohin Geduld Gallery and very recent large paintings at Joan Washburn Gallery were evidence that, like his much younger colleagues, Carone keeps evolving and becoming more inventive as the years pass. An admired teacher closely associated with the Abstract Expressionists, Carone began showing regularly in New York in 1954, at the legendary Stable Gallery, downtown, and later at the respected Staempfli Gallery, on Madison Avenue, establishing his reputation with gestural abstractions that seemed haunted by oblique references to the body. Yet after 1962 he stopped showing here for almost four decades, triumphantly returning to the scene only in 2005. Since then, we've seen a fifty-year survey of his works on paper and showings of recent large canvases, as well as, for the first time, the enigmatic sculptures Carone has made over the past three decades:

mysterious stone heads, at once completely of the moment and classical, whose imagery, like that of his elusive works on paper and canvas, threatens to revert to lumps of ancient rock if we look away. What distinguished all of these diverse works, whatever their medium, was their sensuality, ambiguity, and assured spatial construction.

At first glance, Carone's paintings and works on paper demanded to be read as abstractions: expanses of overlapping, shifting, generously scaled biomorphic forms that hardened, in places, into sharper geometry. There was a flavor of de Kooning, pre-1950—*Pink Angels*, say, or one of those wonderful black paintings—but Carone's piles of outlined planes seemed at once deeper and more frieze-like, contradictory as that sounds. We were engaged by the rhythmic tangles of layered shapes stretching from edge to edge on the paper or canvas, and then suddenly, we began to see the floating planes as phalanxes of figures: standing, seated, and in motion, pushing forward from within the picture, fragmented, dissolving, and recombining. Everything was at once specific and in flux. Suave curves suggested arching backs, buttocks, and bent knees, while straighter lines suggested limbs in tension and more upright postures, but the drawn lines kept escaping from their initial assignments to imply still other body parts and the scale of the loosely evoked bodies (and their components) kept changing. At times, Carone briefly stabilized the uncanny activity of his loosely invoked figures by solidifying the pulsing "bodies" against continuous zones of color; at other times, he let everything evanesce into an artfully inflected cat's cradle of multivalent lines in a single hue.

At first acquaintance, Carone's recent paintings seemed to address identical concerns to those of his works on paper. Near monochromes of black and white, with a range of seemingly inadvertent greys (whites dragged over black), they conjured up the same evasive imagery as the drawings, employing a similar lexicon of black, grey, and white lines, all liquid sweeps and plunges. But there the likeness between the paintings and the paperworks ended. In Carone's paintings, the ample scale of the shapes and the sheer physicality of the paint altered our reading of his implicit imagery. A generous figural presence made itself felt in the large pictures; hints of tall, active bodies filled the available space—there were overtones of Matisse's dancers in his mural at the Barnes Foundation or the minimally drawn nudes of his *Chicago Bathers by a River*. But we were as deeply involved in savoring the brushy expanses of transparent pigment, drips, and scumbles as we were in deciphering echoes of human forms. (Carone's large paintings at Joan Washburn were executed on tarpaulins, which intensified the way paint slid over the surface and insured that gestural lines retained their integrity.) The tension between the urgently manipulated paint and the almost subliminally drawn figures, in fact, was an important component of the paintings' impact. And that impact, like that of the drawings shown at Lohin Geduld, was remarkable. The uninhibited energy of Carone's recent efforts would do credit to a much younger artist. But a much

younger artist, lacking those many decades of thinking about and making art, might not have been capable of achieving the authority and audacity of this long-lived painter's powerful recent works.

Those for whom the time-honored disciplines of painting and sculpture were too conventional could console themselves with a series of large-scale extravaganzas, some temporary, one a monumentally-scaled, permanent earthwork, installed at points within and outside of the City. The recently revitalized Park Avenue Armory presented its first commissioned art installation, the Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's "anthropodino," a huge—120 feet wide by 180 feet long—environment of translucent fabric suspended from the magnificent openwork trusses of the immense Wade Thomson drill hall. An enormous canopy, sweeping from numerous points of attachment, was pierced at intervals by what were described as "aromatic fabric stalactites" plunging to within about four and a half feet of the floor. Swollen at their bottom ends with spices—mostly cinnamon with occasional hints of clove—they punctuated the space and were available for passersby to sniff; think fantastically distended pantyhose, jury-rigged on a dryer vent to catch lint. Below the canopy was a maze of igloo-like "pods" and passageways, sometimes including more "stalactites," defined by swelling walls formed by layers of fabric held in tension on a system of interlocking ribs; holes in the layers, tidily blanket-stitched and often connected by tunnels that emphasized the air trapped within the walls, offered views into the interior spaces and tempting places for arms to be thrust in. The layers blurred our view of people walking within the passages and pods; the holes provided intermittent moments of clarity. Padded floors within some of the pods, like giant mattresses, in brilliant colors, encouraged visitors to stretch out and relax. A large scallop-edged "pool" filled with small blue balls completed the ensemble.

Billed as "epic" and "interactive," and designed, through the inclusion of the spices and the places to sprawl, to engage more than the visual sense, "anthropodino" resembled nothing so much as a soft, temporary version of those cobbled-together, swoopy, environmentally sensitive structures associated with the counterculture of the 1960s, those unfettered assemblies that presented curves, swells, and biomorphic forms as peace- and love-affirming alternatives to the geometry of establishment architecture. Far from seeming to fuse past and present, however, Neto's construction appeared to belong wholly to another era—a throwback to the informality and communal idealism of the Flower Child generation. (A sculptor with whom I visited "anthropodino," like me, old enough to remember when *Hair* was a current production and not a revival, saw the whole enterprise as an exercise in nostalgia and cynically suggested that Neto had been waiting to realize the project for a very long time.)

Whether intentionally or unintentionally retro, "anthropodino" appeared to be a hit, especially among the under-ten set. I recall seeing one adult, iPod in place, lying in a comfortable spot, when I visited, but

for the most part, Neto's "epic" environment seemed to be the day-care center of choice for the Upper East Side. A group of preschoolers was happily installed in one of the pods with their keepers; mothers and nannies relaxed while their charges bounced on the padding; an entire fifth grade class seemed to have squeezed into a cave-like pod festooned with equivocally proportioned "stalactites," bumping their heads and having a fine time on the thick, soft floor. Best of all was the pool of balls. Kids plunged into the "sea," waved disembodied arms and legs, and occasionally poked their noses above the surface. On the whole, they were the most interesting thing about "anthropodino"—that and the opportunity it provided to see the enormous expanse of the drill hall's eloquent, scarred floor. It's not exactly news that art and entertainment have fused. Witness the fun-house atmosphere of last summer's Olafur Eliasson exhibitions at MoMA and P.S. 1 or the enormous couch provided for viewers of Pipilotti Rist's video installation in MoMA's atrium. At least Neto was straightforward about declaring his wish literally to engage his audience, rather than obscuring a fairly modest effort with a lot of pretentious rhetoric. For that, both Neto and the Park Avenue Armory deserve a good deal of credit. But I look forward to some other artist's responding in more provocative ways to the possibilities of that amazing space.

The modish notion of "interactive" sculpture made of unexpected materials was also proposed by Jessica Stockholder's incomprehensibly named *Flooded Chambers Maid* installed in Madison Square Park. The piece incorporated a long, low platform paved with a vaguely Russian constructivist multicolored design, fitted considerately around a couple of trees. Bleachers, connected to the platform by a blue "path," offered a vantage point from which to view the image, end on. Behind the bleachers, Stockholder's signature detritus—grids of upended orange plastic buckets and blue plastic "bricks"—was combined with beds of plants whose colors were intended to extend the conceit; a rather spindly canna (I think it was) was framed by a circle of blue gravel.

I confess that I've never been completely convinced about Stockholder's collages of banal, usually brightly colored vernacular materials, which have been lauded as fusing painting and sculpture. I've long felt that the plastic buckets, the snow fencing, the carpet, and all the rest of the seemingly random assortment of stuff that Stockholder deploys, presumably for their inherent hues, textures, and forms, remain untransformed by her efforts; rather than being subsumed by their new context, the diverse parts stubbornly retain their original identities. It's a risk with all collage sculpture; when David Smith or Anthony Caro fails to transform the meaning and visual language of any of the found objects they often include in their constructions, the work usually suffers. We may discover, after a while, that an eloquent element in a potent sculpture started life as a ploughshare, but that shouldn't be the first thing we notice. Unfortunately, I'm always more aware of the components of Stockholder's improvised palette than of what she has done with them.

The good news is that this quality was somewhat less of a problem in *Flooded Chambers Maid*, partly because the materials were more uniform; the big issue in the platform “image” seemed to be the contrast of shiny and matte elements, but just what the platform was made of seemed incidental. That bleachers looked like nothing but bleachers, despite their blue base, seemed just fine. The garden section of the piece, however, seemed more an evocation of a toy-strewn suburban yard than the high-minded disquisition on “nature/not nature” we were asked to consider. I kept thinking, with some nostalgia, about Dennis Oppenheim’s stylized gardens made of industrial materials, installed in several locations around the City a few years ago, or Martha Schwartz’s celebrated grove of traffic cones designed, improbably enough, for Disney. When Oppenheim and Schwartz forced plastic and nature to fight it out, they made the outcome of the struggle seem overwhelmingly important. *Flooded Chambers Maid*, by comparison, seemed merely self-conscious and clever. As to the “interactive” part, on several strolls through the park, I’ve seen people sitting on the bleachers and a young child revolving slowly, on the top level. In a slide show on the *New York Times* website—which makes the piece look far larger and more appealing than it does in actuality—people walk on the platform and recline to sun themselves, while the artist sits on an upturned orange bucket in the garden section; on site, both areas are permanently fenced off and the public rigorously excluded.

If Stockholder’s transient *Flooded Chambers Maid* looks better in on-line images than in reality, Maya Lin’s permanent earthwork, *Storm King Wavefield*, inaugurated last spring, resists photography. It can only be experienced when we get ourselves to the Storm King Art Center (about an hour north of the city, in Mountainville, New York), and either hike or take the Center’s tram to the far end of the large sculpture park, and walk through the eleven acres of the installation. The most recent and most ambitious of Lin’s series of constructions based on ocean wave patterns—studies and related works are on view in the Center’s indoor galleries—*Storm King Wavefield* transforms a former gravel pit flanked by a low hill into a sequence of seven undulating ridges, slightly convex on one side and slightly concave on the other, like cresting waves, separated by gentle “troughs,” with the whole planted with grasses and vetches.

Look down from the high ground curving around the site—a legacy of the gravel pit—and the monumental construction spreads out in tidy rows. The relationship of the repeated, rhythmically scalloped ridges is revealed as orderly and regular. The static “waves” appear to be fairly uniform in length and evenly spaced, the peaks and lows of the “crests” alternate in a lucid way from ridge to ridge, and the height of the various waves seems quite equal—although the depth of the troughs seems to vary. Moving around the site, at an elevated level, notably changes our perceptions of the overlapping ridges. Scale relationships shift, but the general sense of regularity and repetition persists.

Descend into the troughs of the “waves,” walk between the ridges,

then climb to the top of one, move down to the next trough, climb the next "wave," and then do it again—seven times, if possible—and our perception of the space begins to change. The inflections of the ground beneath our feet seem subtler and more varied than we imagined, the differences in the flanks of the "waves" more pronounced. We notice a subtle likeness between the profiles of Lin's ridges and the distant hills. And *Storm King Wavefield* begins to seem even larger than we thought, as we gazed down from an upper slope.

Yet the nagging sense of regularity and dull symmetry never quite disappears. It's not surprising, since the basis of Lin's "drawing" is the plottable geometry of ocean wave patterns. When we're in the ocean, we're aware of the rhythm of the swells and breakers, but our attention is held by the constant motion of the water and the infinite differences between waves, not their similarities. Lin's point, of course, in constructing her various *Wavefields*, is to reveal the impossibility of translating the rhythmic movement of an immense expanse of saltwater into a series of static structures in an immense chunk of landscape. Certainly, she exploits the tension between these opposing qualities of the world around us. This is a provocative concept that obviously offers her a stimulating place to begin. A concept, however stimulating, is not necessarily an end in itself, and Lin appears to have been so wedded to her generating idea that she seems to have rejected the possibility of using her oceanographically-correct wave pattern model more freely. (Some of the works on view in the indoor galleries suffer from the same kind of literal-mindedness.) What would have happened if she abandoned scientifically accurate proportions and allowed—say—the undulations to become less regular or to vary the lengths of the rises and falls, for purely aesthetic reasons? But I suspect that time will put the finishing aesthetic touches on *Storm King Wavefield*. When the grasses grow, the tops of the undulations will be less crisply defined; and when the wind blows, movement will be added to the static waves. I'm looking forward to a return visit, later this season.