

Contemporary American and Italian Artists on Paper

Exhibition statement by Larry Lambert

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Works of art can motivate humans to action and contemplation in myriad ways, and the works in this exhibition display an amazing array of creative approaches that force artists, images, and audiences to interact in a web of familiar and unknown connections. Embodied by these new works on paper, this presentation of Italia and America juxtaposes contexts of local site and global diffusion, processes of commodity and concept, and widely disparate notions of value to construct a group exhibition that challenges those experiencing the artists' works to construct new mental models of how meaning might be realized in twenty-first century life.

Contemporary artistic interaction pushes against and sometimes shatters the boundaries that our society and its media pundits attempt to place around localities, whether those boundaries are physical barriers, map-based constructs, or conceptual categories. When these boundaries are demolished, however, the kernel of local engagement remains even as the local area becomes corrupted by centrifugal forces of change. The global diffusion of images, ideas, symbols, and people through webs of media and technology continues but cannot erase an artwork's rootedness. Even the transformation of art into commodity as one more variety of global capitalism may be disrupted, even briefly, by the productive confusion surrounding an exhibition of artworks like this one. This exhibition's assemblage of Midwestern America and northern Italy seems bizarre at first but both localities promote reverence for traditions founded in toil and soil while also moving beyond those traditions. The landscape arenas of Timothy Vermeulen or of Paola Blasi are rooted in local knowledge of American literature and Italian weather but not totally contained by those local elements; there is a sense of power and uncertainty that transcends the traditions embedded in the images. The land disappears in Adam Benjamin Fung's starscapes but replacing pebbles with stars only strengthens the cognizance that an expansive location does not insulate us from the consequences of our actions. In a similar vein, Federico Ernesto Santagata's abstract conceptualizations of action create the suggestion of a location in the process being formed before our eyes. It is a disconcerting yet familiar feeling.

Artistic creations not only produce a sense of the local emerging before our eyes, they can dissolve that sensation. The works of Aldo Bertolini and Francesco Filincieri Santinelli depict very specific and even recognizable places but the signs of those locations begin to dissipate before they can be organized in our minds. Meanings move between comprehension and apprehension, with the works' strong yet uneasy amalgamation of forms and colors never fully settling into clear categories that allow us to fix those works' local knowledge. This dissolution of unequivocal reference to locality does not cause the mind to wander, however, but instead pushes us to focus on how the works engage us to interact with the entirety of the works' elements. What was local expands to encompass all localities and, as in the works of Sonia Vicario, the expanded sense of placement that we gain from her images uncovers hidden worlds in the center of abstract forms. This sense of uncertain place and hidden meaning permeates the paintings of Marisa Facchinetti. Is that a grove of trees rearranging itself into a map of the deepest recesses of our unconscious thoughts? Each of those locations provides us with both comfort and

fear. Even the angles and disrupted forms in Giovanna Martinelli's images seem as traditional and ominous as a hometown where we search for people and places we once knew. We may recognize Rome or Milan or Chicago, or even seemingly familiar and reliable artistic elements, but the images in this exhibition provoke in us an aesthetic understanding of forms, colors, and especially locations that transform them into the potential for greater insight into what it means to be human. And that may be the most disconcerting feeling of all.

The seeming disconnection to any locality forces some of the works in this exhibition to be scrutinized time and again, and so fix the viewer's location into a position where examination of the work can take place over an extended period of time. Upon this type of extended reflection, Giorgio Del Basso's stitches may speak the language of surgery, connecting to current political debates, or may communicate the despair at attributing meaning of any kind, while for Fred Stonehouse's (in)human figures one could substitute psychology for surgery and hysteria for despair. These artists' images, however, definitely problematize a host of issues associated with attributing value to art. These works display value in ways that can hardly be conceptualized in terms that promote collectors to buy them, yet they are imbued with an understanding of artistic quality that partakes of both genius and the mundane. As capitalism conquers our globalized media culture completely, aesthetic value may be irrelevant. The works in this exhibition, however, are difficult to perceive as commodities that can just be exchanged without any consideration of technique, inspiration, or emotion. The sense of how value should be determined for artwork is too often bound to our knowledge of price and reputation, but this exhibition shows us that artwork accrues value in other ways, especially in its ability to engage in a conversation with some indeterminate coalescence of artists, audiences, reflective experiences, and aesthetic understanding in local and non-local contexts.

The human figures so prominently featured in many of this exhibition's images jar our understanding of what it means to have a local option. Jason Cytacki's people show his keen perception of both the inner and the outer worlds that motivate our actions toward others, localities that cannot be pinned down by our conscious thoughts; even when he imparts only minimal parts of a body, those fragments connect to a form unpainted that frames our unconscious placement of an intensely Midwestern locale. The body parts that shine in Laura Cutler's figures, however, are drained of locality and even the surroundings display a sense of everywhere and nowhere that perfectly fits today's technologically-driven globalized society, while the figures in Merna Holloway's photographic images partake of local knowledge so variable and intense that the clash between the European references, the Midwestern look of the bodies, and the transnational textures of the skins expand our sense of localized living. This sense of local knowledge reaching out for global placement permeates Silvio Varazzani's photos of active people, as well as Alan Larkin's "Small World" prints of a fantastical yet recognizable universe. Scott Hatt's images work in opposition to this globalizing process, directing our attention away from his carefully crazy colors, shapes, and people, and towards specific human figures and actualized localities in the form of American states. Specific localities are then transformed into iconic and nationalized American meanings in Heath Yenna's collages, but the missing body parts, whether a foot or an entire body, turn the icons into cons. In Yenna's works, America's stereotypical positive thinking becomes its opposite, a healthy corrective for a vacuous attitude of global superiority.

The culmination of these juxtapositions of local and global appears most strongly in the works of David Lester Learn and Marco Baj. Learn's paintings explore sections of the boundary between local order and global chaos. There is an edge that is constantly changing, as if we are constantly in the middle of his composition process, but then the images on the paper seem to explode, and our perception of the difference between what is local and what is global collapses into emotional response. Baj's abstract works, that on reflection seem not so abstract at all, instead are three-dimensional landscapes in sound and motion. The works extract the essence of nature's regularity in their rows and rows of dots, as in the land viewed from a distance or a bird's song perceived from below, and position nature against the artificiality of rococo curves, transforming these seemingly abstract images disconnected from any local knowledge into landscapes that leap from the paper and into all the places that we have ever imagined. This group exhibition of American and Italian artists displays the truth of today's wonderfully confused connection between what is local and what is global. It is a truism that all knowledge is local, but it is impossible for it to remain so.