

# ARTFORUM

## INTERVIEWS

### ANDREW MASULLO ON APRIL DAWN ALISON

November 15, 2019 • The artist explains how he recovered a photographer's lifework



**April Dawn Allison, *Untitled*, n.d.** Photo: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Andrew Masullo.

*For many years, a commercial photographer named Alan Schaefer (1941–2008) privately created an extraordinary body of work: a series of over 9,000 Polaroid self-portraits of an exuberant woman known as April Dawn Alison.*

*While little is known of Alan—neighbors recalled he loved jazz and baseball—April Dawn is well documented in many and various domestic performances: as a French maid, bikini model, bondage partner, and more. Several hundred of these Polaroids are being presented publicly for the first time in an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, organized by curator Erin O’Toole, who also edited a related monograph with contributions by Hilton Als and Zackary Drucker (MACK, 2019). “This was a lifelong artistic endeavor,” notes O’Toole, explaining both the stakes of the practice and the museum’s decision to display the images posthumously. “The act of photography is part of the pictures, too,” she observes, “a working photographer thinking about photography.” But April Dawn would very likely have been lost to history were it not for Andrew Masullo, a San Francisco–based artist and collector with a keen*

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*eye and sensitive instincts. Here, he shares a personal reflection of finding, holding, and ultimately letting go of the complete known works of April Dawn Alison. —Jordan Stein*

**APRIL, DAWN, ALISON.** Separately, these three names are quite meaningless to me. But when placed in the order you see here and removed of their commas, they explode in my brain, a full-force volcano, blasting not lava, but Polaroids, thousands and thousands of Polaroids—9,245, to be exact.

I once lived with April Dawn Alison's Polaroids. Her photographic triumph was my secret obsession. In one of the few selfless acts of my life, I gave them to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a museum perfect for her needs. SFMoMA loves her photos almost as much as I do, and will care for them and share them with the world. The museum is right across the bay from Oakland, the city April Dawn Alison called home for decades—where, over time, she walled herself off in her two-bedroom apartment and explored her secret inner-self with her best friend, her Polaroid camera.

My history with April Dawn Alison began in 2015. Through an acquaintance, I learned that a late commercial photographer's pictures had been languishing in a warehouse for years and were available for purchase. Thousands of self-portraits shot over a thirty-five-year period had been stuffed into a dozen boxes, each portraying the photographer—who I later learned was Alan Schaefer—as a woman. With my history of collecting practically everything under the sun—especially unique, vernacular photos—these pictures were right up my alley.



April Dawn Alison, *Untitled*, n.d. Photo: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Andrew Masullo.

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I was shocked the first time I saw the Polaroids in person. I had never seen 9,245 Polaroids all at once. It was a mountain of photos, like the Rock of Gibraltar in my living room. After picking through just a few pictures, I knew I needed to see every single photo in every single box and would never forgive myself if I didn't.

During the next two years, I carefully unearthed April Dawn Alison's visual life. I savored my labor of love and dreaded that future day when I'd reach my final photo. The extravaganza that was April Dawn's wardrobe—outfits, wigs, handbags, high heels, jewelry—made me merrily delirious. While it's clear that April Dawn was committed to being a woman, she loved being many different kinds of women: a vibrant teenager, an elegant matron, a severe librarian, an oppressed worker, a pinup model, a seasoned actress, a mod go-go girl, an S&M babe, a wizened floozy, a French maid. The number of French maid photos alone in the archive is astounding. April Dawn owned at least a half-dozen frilly, French maid costumes and an endless supply of lace gloves, petticoats, and feather dusters.

At the root of her portrayals and their documentation was April Dawn Alison's need to see herself the way others might have seen her had they only been given the chance: She was her own voyeur. What an incredible need she must have had to repeatedly perform the ritual of watching herself emerge from the birth canal of her Polaroid camera. What excitement she must have felt to welcome herself over and over again into the world! On occasion you see April Dawn studying her pictures or holding the developing photos out to the camera, out to an unknown, future audience as if saying, "See? Look! This is me! I'm April Dawn Alison! I really exist! Here's the proof!"



April Dawn Alison, *Untitled*, n.d. Photo: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, gift of Andrew Masullo.

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Her bedroom was the only place in her apartment that was, photographically speaking, verboten. Why, April Dawn—in 9,245 Polaroids—why do we never once see the bed on which you slept? She endlessly posed in her kitchen, dining area, living room, hallway leading to her bedroom, and small balcony. For me, her balcony is the location for some of most fabulous photos. Knowing her penchant for privacy, I marvel at her bravery in stepping out onto her balcony, out into the world, for scores of photo shoots—even in her bikini! Surely, she risked neighbors watching from across the street.

Many of the boxes housing the Polaroids were specially fashioned by April Dawn. She reused the large white boxes in which her Polaroid film packages were shipped. (She bought in bulk, of course.) She covered over printed areas with anything white to make the boxes pure, wordless, her own. In them she placed hundreds of her self-portraits, neatly stacked, each photo shoot carefully separated from the next. On some of the boxes she affixed little slips of paper on which she wrote in red ink—always red ink—brief descriptions of their contents. On one such slip she wrote “April Dawn Avedon.” While perhaps tongue-in-cheek, I see April Dawn’s declaration a primal belief in herself as a photographer and her Polaroids as worthy of a future.

That future was jeopardized after April Dawn’s death, but the care she took in seeing to their welfare saved them. With the contents of her home a cluttered chaos, estate liquidators were hired to toss nearly everything she owned into the trash. They found the boxes perched on shelves in her bedroom, apart from the general bedlam of the apartment. The photographs were spared.

No one in the world ever knew April Dawn Alison. Her life, in the form of the Polaroids she carefully maintained, is our only proof she ever lived. I see April Dawn’s photos in so many kaleidoscopic ways. One is as her Hail Mary pass, notes in a bottle tossed into the ocean. I believe it was April Dawn’s hope that her Polaroids would one day be seen and, in so doing, her existence acknowledged. For the brief time I had her photographs, it was my privilege to have her wish fulfilled.

*“April Dawn Alison,” curated by Erin O’Toole, is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through December 1, 2019.*

**The New York Times**

## **Painting From the 1980s, When Brash Met Flash**

By ROBERTA SMITH FEB. 9, 2017



Left, Kathe Burkhart's painting "Prick: From the Liz Taylor Series (Suddenly Last Summer)," from 1987, reprises a movie scene with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift. Right, "Baron Sinister"

In New York at the end of the 1970s, many people thought painting was all washed up. And if not washed up, it had to be abstract — the more austere, unemotional and geometric, the better.

Then came the 1980s and a generation of young painters, like Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Eric Fischl, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, and everything changed. With ["Fast Forward: Painting From the 1980s,"](#) an irresistible if flawed exhibition, the Whitney Museum tries to sort out how that happened.

The '80s artists were initially called Neo-Expressionist, an insufficient term, given their stylistic diversity, but one that signaled their accessibility and flair. They drew from art history, the news, graffiti and pop culture. Their work embraced different forms of narrative, often with psychological or erotic overtones, and new kinds of self-awareness



and worldliness. Even those who painted abstractly had it, in the form of humor or outside references. Across the board, many worked in large scale, often physically eccentric ways. Mr. Schnabel's habit of painting on broken crockery became an emblem of the moment, but was only one variation on the bulked-up or expanded forms of collage devised by these artists.



“White Squad I” (1982), by Leon Golub. Credit All Rights Reserved, Leon Golub, via Licensed by VAGA, New York; Jake Naughton for The New York Times

In a sense, the painting that emerged in the early '80s was mongrel and illegitimate. In logical art-historical terms, it wasn't supposed to happen. The much-heralded Pictures Generation, a group of photo-based nonpainters, could trace its pedigree to 1970s Conceptual and performance art, and promised an orderly succession. But this divide is often exaggerated: I can imagine painters like Mr. Schnabel and Mr. Fischl thinking, if the Conceptual and performance artists, and their Pictures Generation progeny, can use figures and tell stories, we can, too.

The Neo-Expressionists were an instant hit. The phrases “art star” “sellout show” and “waiting list” gained wide usage, sometimes linked to artists you'd barely heard of. Appearances in glossy magazines became routine. And many people were not happy. The Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd wrote that “talent may strike” Mr. Salle and that Mr. Schnabel “may grow up.” Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, a leading art theorist, labeled them “ciphers of regression” — insignificant, backward daubers who would soon disappear.

For a long time, that seemed to be the case. Over the last quarter-century, '80s painting has tended to be ignored, if not maligned for the macho persona projected by some of its practitioners, and for reheating the art market after the relatively quiet, supposedly pure '70s.

The Whitney show is the first attempt by a New York museum to survey this period, to feature the art stars of Neo-Expressionism but also to include lesser-knowns and to demonstrate — as with any period — that there was much more going on.



“Sextant in Dogtown,” from 1987, by David Salle. Credit All Rights Reserved, David Salle, via Licensed by VAGA, New York; Jake Naughton for The New York Times

The heady sense of the 1980s is felt right off the elevator in three works rooted in street art and graffiti, each presenting a complex world in a distinct style. Kenny Scharf’s mural-size “When the Worlds Collide” (1984) is a cartoon-graffiti outer-space fantasy, mostly in red. Basquiat’s 1982 painting [“LNAPRK”](#) (for the Luna Park outside Milan) — half turquoise, half black, with an idiosyncratic use of stretcher bars — presents a bristling stream-of-consciousness overlay of cartoon faces, a bull’s head scavenged from Picasso, the phrase “Italy in the 1500’s” and “essen” — eat in German — repeated three times. These works are hung on walls covered with Haring’s black-and-white graffiti figure patterns — as well known as Mr. Schnabel’s plates — along with an untitled and unusual Haring piece. Rendered in felt-tip on synthetic animal hide, like a jazzed-up prehistoric work, it presents the implicitly moral Haring universe with figures and

symbols signifying love and war, life and death, the satanic and the religious, all interlocking.

Drawn from the Whitney's collection, "Fast Forward" has great moments, in individual efforts and the groupings worked out by its organizers, Jane Panetta, an associate curator, and Melinda Lang, a curatorial assistant. They allow the paintings to complement, but also challenge, one another.

In the first gallery, we can compare the different styles and emotional urgencies in three big paintings by Mr. Fischl, Mr. Schnabel, and Leon Golub. The 1983 Fischl diptych ["A Visit To / A Visit From / the Island"](#) contrasts frolicking white people and struggling Haitians on different tropical beaches, starkly raising the issues of the world's refugee crises and what is now called white privilege. Its loosely painted realism owes something to both news photos and the Ashcan School.



"LNAPRK," by Jean-Michel Basquiat, hung on a wall covered with Keith Haring's black-and-white graffiti figure patterns. Credit 2017 The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, via ADAGP, Paris, via ARS, New York; Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Opposite is Golub's ["White Squad I,"](#) from 1982, in which three mercenaries or soldiers (who are not all white by the way) stand over the prone bodies of a brown-skinned man and woman who seem to have been beaten. All the figures float against a background stained rust-red, evoking heat, violence and blood but also the heroic color fields of Abstract Expressionism. The huge canvas, unstretched, and flat to the wall, has the grandeur of a Renaissance fresco.

Between them, Mr. Schnabel's vibrant ["Hope,"](#) from 1982, conjures a diffuse existential unease grounded in European motifs. A skull, a crucifix and the suggestion of a



sorrowing Rubenesque nude press in on a naked man (possibly the artist) who may be leaving them behind. At once absurd and solemn, it is rendered in big splintery brush strokes of gorgeous colors on a patchwork collage of gold and blue velvet (the blue resembles an overheated Titian sky). On view at the Whitney for only the second time in 20 years, this painting is a breathtaking sight.

The second gallery groups together stars, like Mr. Salle, with others, including Joyce Pensato, overlooked until recently, who dallied in the images of popular culture, pulling its meanings in provocative directions. Mr. Salle's harlequin figures, painted from color reproductions against tones of blue and orange, are splayed across the top half of his ["Sextant in Dogtown,"](#) from 1987. Below this elegant mix of old and modern are three inky renderings, indelibly contemporary, based on photographs Mr. Salle took of a seminude woman holding a garment in one instance and a Noguchi lamp in another. The work is an outstanding example of Mr. Salle's visual sophistication.

In comparison, Kathe Burkhart's blunt "Prick: From the Liz Taylor Series (Suddenly Last Summer)," from 1987, reprises a movie scene with Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift in exuberantly trashy paint, vinyl and fake gold leaf. Walter Robinson's painting "Baron Sinister" (1986) places a heavy-breathing pulp-fiction cover on a demure field of white Rymanesque brushwork, and Peter Cain's hyper-real "Z" (1989) reduces a gleaming ad-ready image of a car to a phallus on wheels.



Left, Eric Fischl's 1983 diptych, "A Visit To / A Visit From / The Island," and, at right, "Hope" (1982), by Julian Schnabel. Credit Jake Naughton for The New York Times

The final gallery brings a welcome calmness with work tending toward a more anchored, inward feeling. It is reigned over by Terry Winters's ["Good Government"](#) (1984), a large and beautiful painting of molecular forms adrift in a cream-colored space, whose title has suddenly gained new resonance. Mary Heilmann's "Big Bill" (1987), a wide white band angling through a field of blue, gives abstraction an insouciant nonchalance, while the

wavy green and red lines of Moira Dryer's "Portrait of a Fingerprint" are hypnotically oceanic. The least-known artist here is Carlos Alfonzo, whose "Told," from 1990, is a big burly form in dark colors. Its power is lessened by the sketchy figure at its center that may represent Mr. Alfonzo's knowledge that he had AIDS. (He would die in 1991.) But the work brims with talent and ambition.

The Whitney show is quite satisfying — even revelatory — since many works have not been on view in years. But the exhibition's unrealized potential is equally visible. To start with, the Whitney's collection has some unfortunate gaps. Among the most glaring is the absence of one of [Philip Taaffe's](#) burnished reprises of the '60s Op Art paintings of Bridget Riley or Victor Vasarely, which operated in the gray area between the Neo-Expressionists and the Pictures Generation.

Also, "Fast Forward" has not been given enough room to even take advantage of outstanding '80s paintings the museum already owns. Over a dozen artists are represented with small works mostly on paper crowded salon-style on one wall, which is insulting. But there are pleasant surprises here: early works by Andrew Masullo; a Nancy Spero collage; and a painterly, highly personal Glenn Ligon. With more space, some of these artists could have been represented by larger efforts.

The show reminds us that art doesn't adhere neatly to decades; what we consider '80s painting began in the 1970s and extended into the 1990s. Too bad the curators didn't stretch the decade a bit more. They could have added Joe Zucker's funny beautiful "[Merlyn's Lab](#)," from 1977, whose mosaiclike surface of color-soaked cotton balls presages Mr. Schnabel's broken crockery. Elizabeth Murray's great 1978 painting "[Children Meeting](#)" also deserves to be here. With its bold-scale, brilliant colors and grand biomorphic evocations of cartooning and Surrealism, this is among the first paintings of the American 1980s and would have given Mr. Scharf's "When the Worlds Collide" a run for its money.

onetheless, "Fast Forward" reveals a complex subject crying out for attention by outlining how the Neo-Expressionists and their '80s cohort broke painting wide open. Their legacy is a sense of freedom and possibility that infuses the medium to this day.

### **Correction: February 11, 2017**

An art review on Friday about "Fast Forward: Painting From the 1980s" at the Whitney Museum of American Art misspelled the surname of an artist whose work is featured in the show. He is Peter Cain, not Caine.

Fast Forward: Painting From the 1980s

Through May 14 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; 212-570-3600, [whitney.org](http://whitney.org).

# Los Angeles Times



Detail of Andrew Masullo's "6432," 2015-16, oil on canvas, 16 inches by 20 inches. (Full frame below.) (Zevitas Marcus)

By **David Pagel**

NOVEMBER 2, 2016, 12:15 PM

Andrew Masullo's modestly scaled paintings at Zevitas Marcus are visual analogs to impossibly specific — and oddly anonymous — experiences.

The one in the front window is titled, inventory-style, "6432," and captures the satisfactions of singing in the shower, belting out off-key oldies as hot water drums on your skull. Painted the same red, yellow and blue, "6400" conveys what it feels like to finish a tough job and crack open a cold one, knowing you're free until sunrise.



Andrew Masullo's "6400," 2015-16, oil on canvas, 24 inches by 30 inches. (Zevitas Marcus)

Also painted in nothing but blazing primaries, "6436" embodies the uplift of bumping, unexpectedly, into an old friend. And "5982" recalls the soul-expanding release of seeing the city skyline shrink in the rear-view mirror as you speed out of town.

Such precise memories and the sentiments they trigger come rushing to the forefront of "Pretty Pictures and Other Disasters," the New York painter's fifth solo show in Los Angeles since 1990. They're the tip of the iceberg.

Other colors expand the palette of Masullo's eccentrically configured compositions. Black and white figure prominently, but so do pink, orange and baby blue. Green, gray and purple occasionally appear, extending the range and amping up the intensity of the quotidian dramas these animated abstractions elicit.





Andrew Masullo's "6034," 2014-15, oil on canvas, 20 inches by 24 inches. (Zevitas Marcus)

Masullo's colors are wonderful, but his paintings are great because of their shapes and the way they're composed: off-kilter, out of sync, filled with more vim and verve than just about anything else out there. Sometimes Masullo lodges solid chunks of color into slippery jigsaw puzzle-style setups. At others, he blots out missteps. In both cases, he wiggles silliness and seriousness into a dynamic mix.

As a painter, Masullo is the most playful shape-maker of his generation. All of his asymmetrical rectangles, imperfect circles and idiosyncratic blobs, dollops and puffs conspire — and collaborate — to excite the imagination.



Andrew Masullo's "6432," 2015-16, oil on canvas, 16 inches by 20 inches. (Zevitas Marcus)

You can't help but share your responses to his gregarious works with others. That's the paradox — and brilliance — of Masullo's abstract pictures: Each makes you feel as if it were made for you and you alone, while letting you know that the peculiarity of your response is nothing special.

Others matter. And that makes all of us just a little bit more civilized.

*Zevitas Marcus, 2754 S. La Cienega Blvd., Suite B, Los Angeles. Closes Saturday. (424) 298-8088, [www.zevitasmarcus.com](http://www.zevitasmarcus.com)*

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Two Artists Paint Through Different Philosophies

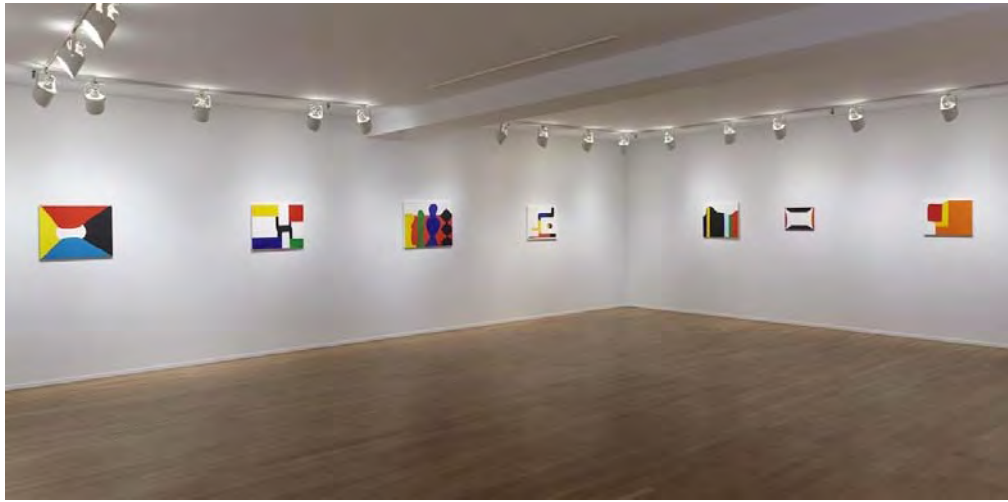
by Will Heinrich | November 11, 2015

I don't know about you, but I experience adulthood as an unrelenting crisis of faith, and I look to art for examples of how to better think about what I'm doing. How can I acknowledge and learn from the past without feeling suffocated or even preempted by it? How can I defend the things that give me meaning from a society determined to strip that meaning away and sell it back to me?



6091 (2014), oil on canvas, 22 x 28 in

In his first solo show at Tibor de Nagy, Andrew Masullo offers one possibility, a meditative focus on constraint. The show begins with “6025” (2014–15), a roll-topped black-on-white panel pierced with nine brightly colored rectangles that establishes his terms: serially numbered, oil-on-linen canvases in handheld sizes; discreetly ambiguous figurative allusions (to me, for example, “6025” looks like a Torah breastplate, though someone else might see enormous brass church doors); and universalist abstractions approached with *haimisher* humility. The Euclidean grid of rectangles in “6025,” laid out by eye, paints itself into a very human corner, squeezing from a brick of glittery graffiti silver on the bottom left to a thin wedge of washed-out Pepto Bismol pink on the top right. Masullo’s palette, an ecumenical union of primaries touching on white, blue, green, and CMYK, knocks everything down half a tone from severity to comfort.



*Installation view, 'Andrew Masullo: Recent Paintings' at Tibor de Nagy*

The great comfort of arbitrary rules is that they're useless to doubt, and Masullo's painting "6052" (2014–15) even looks like a board game. A reversed and multicolored ornamental Hebrew letter *bet* stands against a white background, looking like the path of a fully selfcontained mystical journey; a dot of pie-wedge colors in its center resembles the spinner in Twister. Of course, this board doesn't seem to take you anywhere: start at any one of its three black ends, pass securely through a random progress of red, yellow, and blue, and you will inevitably arrive at black again.



*6052 (2014–15), oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in*



But the escape comes over time, as given rules resolve into transcendent principles. In “5811” (2013), an infinite world of colors seems to spring from the corners of an abstracted black *aleph* set against an uneven white cross. Slowly the color becomes an optical after-effect, a kind of insubstantial dazzle around the black. Then the shapes lose their superficial variation, so that each segment seems to record the same inexhaustible dichotomy of mark making — figure and ground, push and pull, give and receive.



5809 (2013), oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in

With enough practice, even those principles will resolve — as in “5809” (2013), a cloud of patchwork colors that distinguishes neither figure nor ground — into a kind of ecstatic nondualism, a feeling of undivided and selfevident certainty that depends on nothing else. For the viewer as much as for the artist, sustained looking can be a drill, a way of turning your back on social problems in order to tunnel through to the reality that underlies them.

# ARTFORUM

**Andrew Masullo**  
**TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY**  
**724 Fifth Avenue**  
**October 22–December 5**

In an art world glutted with gratuitously large abstract painting, a compact canvas can say more than those the size of billboards. Of the twenty pieces in Andrew Masullo's exuberant exhibition "Recent Paintings," none measures more than three feet tall, and most are two or less. Their high-keyed Crayola colors and lobed, undulating shapes evoke Matisse cut-outs, but Masullo's works are deeply concerned with oil paint. His investigation of texture, translucency, and the intimate complexities within a nonobjective realm of loose geometry recalls certain works by Stanley Whitney and Mary Heilmann.



Andrew Masullo, *5811*, 2013, oil on canvas, 20 x 24"

Dark, palimpsestic shapes lurk beneath the yellow and green rectangles in opposite corners of *5811* (all works cited, 2013): shadows of the painting's metamorphosis. A third corner rectangle is red, matte, and opaque, while a fourth is blue, glossy, sheer, and buzzing with brushwork. These distinctions in viscosity and finish become oddly monumental, given the work's restrained palette and scale. The boundaries separating colors begin to vibrate as one lingers with Masullo's paintings. A frayed border between white and blue reveals a pink underpainting whispering through the crack. When the paintings flop (few do), it is because they lack this internal alchemy. Too slick and they can feel slightly patronizing. *5809*, a blandly cheerful gathering of wavy blobs, could decorate a pediatrician's office.

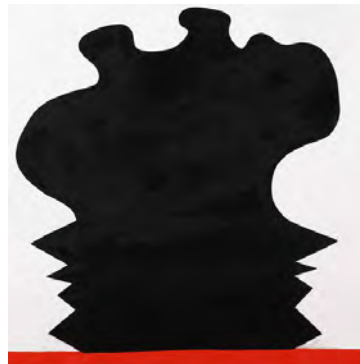
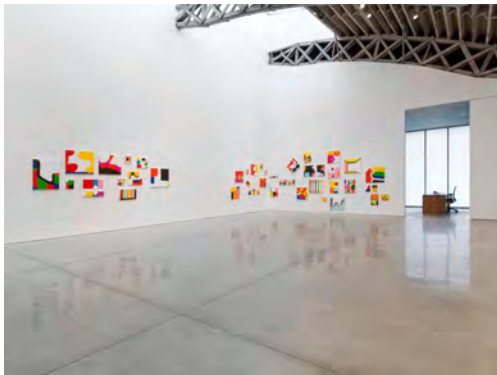
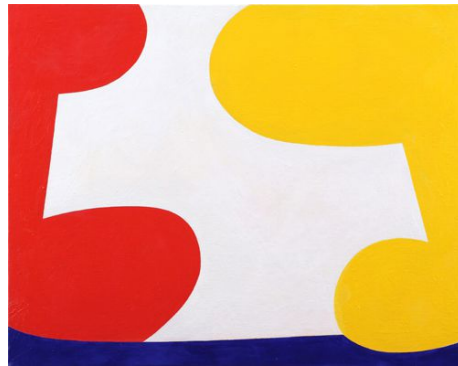
All the works, however, exude a serene self-possession, born of the artist's intuitive process. Masullo will spend years reinventing a single canvas, and each piece contains many paintings. These former selves—glimmering through a semitransparent surface or buried away completely—make Masullo's work feel unexpectedly human.

— Zoe Lescaze

**OBSERVER**

## Andrew Masullo at Mary Boone Gallery

By Will Heinrich • 04/02/13 3:40pm



Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery

Andrew Masullo's modestly sized but manifold nonobjective paintings use sharp edges, complex combinations of simple forms and bright, unmixed colors carefully chosen to cancel each other out. If they don't actually harmonize, they contrast in chords as neat as anything in Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," so that you see them not as separate colors but as unitary rainbows or highly disciplined chromatic armies. These armies probe, press and try to contain robust white spaces, which are generally pressed over to one side but sometimes take up as much as half the canvas. (Not every canvas uses white, but in light of the prevailing pattern, the ones that don't simply seem to fight the same battle with the walls.)

The success or failure of such a Manichaean experiment can only be decided by its most recent attempt. Sometimes it misses: the line of miniatures along the gallery's western wall, for example, which range in size from cigarette pack to pocket paperback, are mostly too small to support their compositional battles, and they look more like copies of larger paintings than works in their own right. But when it succeeds, as with a diamond-shaped canvas on the north wall, in which irregular black, pink, green, orange, blue and red borders steadily close in on a Lego-shaped corner of white, you suddenly forget the fixed set of terms being manipulated and instead feel the gesture of their combination, at once unique in its particular direction and universal in the tension that animates it.

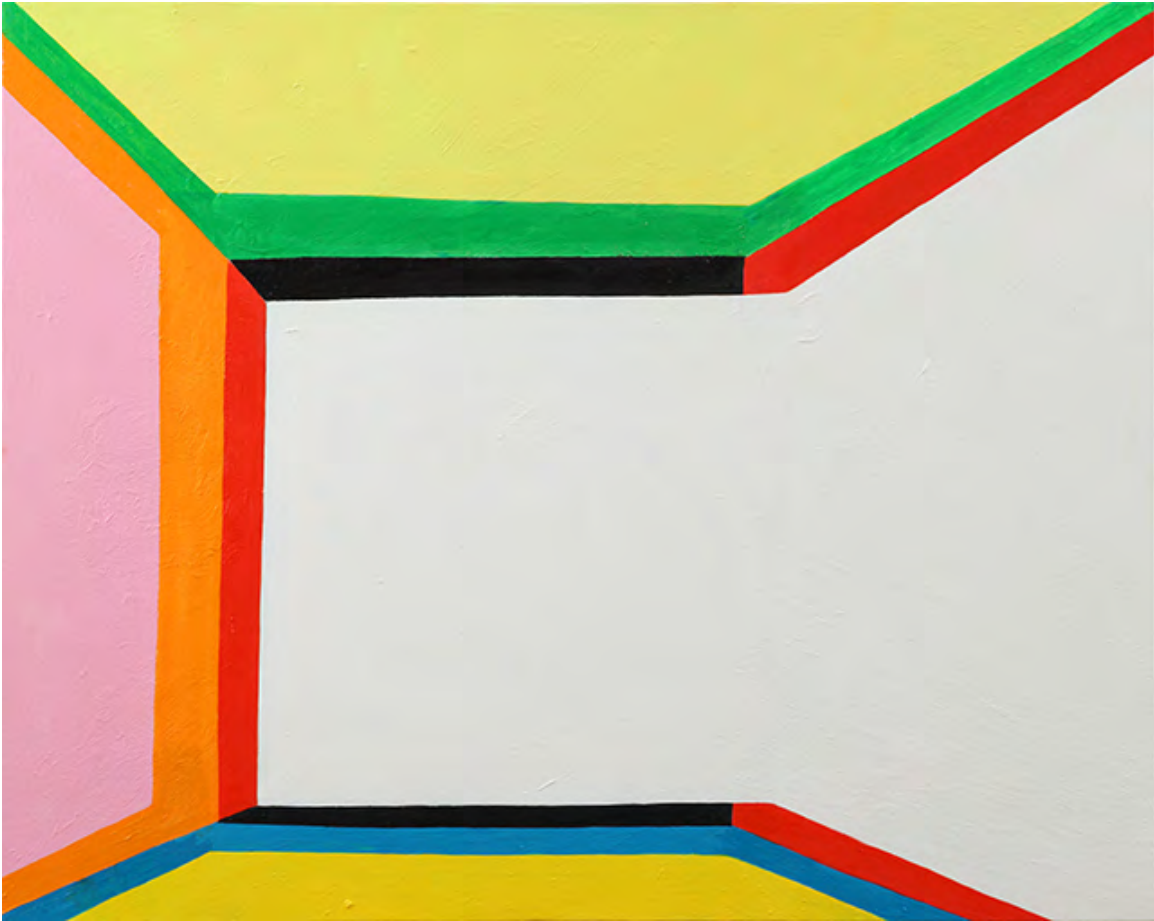
*(Through April 27)*



# HYPERALLERGIC

## Oddly Warped and Genuinely Thrilling Paintings

Rob Colvin April 17, 2013



Andrew Masullo, "5289" (2011), oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches (© Andrew Masullo, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery and Feature Inc., New York)

The [new paintings of Andrew Masullo](#), now at Mary Boone Gallery in conjunction with Feature Inc., outwit, defy, and make gallery-going fun again. With numbers for titles, the works elicit numerous surprises, and these of several kinds. Even the dates startle. One work, ten inches by eight, took him ten years to make.

Very few contemporary abstract painters – and among them I count [Thomas Nozkowski](#), whose work enjoys wide exposure, and [Gary Stephan](#), a Mary Boone artist twenty years

ago and now inexplicably underrepresented in New York – excite and bewilder as Masullo does. There are precedents, though, and the artist isn't shy about his influences; he claims to have once kissed a Forrest Bess painting in a museum, but clarified “no tongue” was involved. In each of Masullo's works is an idiosyncratic self-organization that pulsates with inner life. It's in his economy of means, his concision of wit, and even his materials.



Andrew Masullo, “5357” (2011), oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches (© Andrew Masullo, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery and Feature Inc., New York)

Masullo uses store-bought canvases instead of stretching his own and applies paint straight-from-the-tube, unmixed, as if ignorant of how “professional” paintings are made. Not entirely a joke, it's a practical way to eliminate unnecessary when compositional invention is the real goal. And he paints small, often with the canvas on his lap or propped against a cardboard box or something he quips “leanable.” Something very minor is lost in the Boone showing, however; all the pieces are uniformly flat against the wall, which is to say it's a polished presentation. The first Masullo painting I witnessed was so oddly warped from its insubstantial wood stretcher I mistook it for the work of a high schooler — a genuinely thrilling affect. Still, the curation of works — a corner-

hugging cluster here, a too-spaced-apart line there — clearly embrace Masullo’s oblique charm.

Keeping true to the philosophical principles of non-objective painting, Masullo does not title his pieces. He assigns them numbers – we’re now in the mid-five-thousands – which dissociates them from narrative and language-based thought. But this superficial matter-of-factness yields nothing austere. Just the opposite, emotionless digits are a counterpoint, the foil for forms that wiggle, shuffle, elude, and appear to have a good time.



Andrew Masullo, “5369” (2011), oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches (© Andrew Masullo, courtesy Mary Boone Gallery and Feature Inc., New York)

White, the empty void of ordinary picture-making, is a leading character for Masullo, taunting in its indeterminate presence. It’s often built up physically through a time-extensive, spirit-filled, imposto, giving its role added complexity, especially when beneath its surface are extended strata from elsewhere visible shapes and remnants of the painting’s past. So it dominates and evades simultaneously.

[Andrew Masullo](#) continues at Mary Boone Gallery (541 W 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 27.



# Out There | Live From the Whitney Biennial

Culture

By Kevin McGarry

March 2, 2012 6:00 pm



A view of the Whitney Biennial with the artist Kai Althoff's large tapestry.

The 76th edition of the [Whitney Biennial](#), which opened yesterday, is a show without a name. “It’s not even ‘Untitled,’ ” joked Ed Halter, one of the film program’s co-curators. “It’s basically titleless.” Indeed, the M.O. of this year’s organizers, the Whitney’s Elisabeth Sussman and the independent curator Jay Sanders, seems to be to step out of the way and let the art be art.

That’s not to say there are no curatorial agendas. In a conversation published in the catalog, the curators contend that they prize work that is “the antithesis of art-school art”; that abstains from falsities of radical rhetoric, sexy as they may be; that doesn’t play into the myth that art progresses coherently from year to year, artist to artist, or idea to idea. Authentic transformation can be a messy process, and what is here has been selected for its “explosive” qualities, as Sanders says, and, according to Sussman, made by artists with “deep, thoughtful underpinnings to their practice.” While this may sound like basic criteria for any museum exhibition, a lot of art today is wan, subsisting on overly complicated postured concepts about which you can’t imagine anyone truly cares — including the artists themselves. That’s when contemporary art is at its most tiresome and inaccessible. While this year’s Whitney Biennial does not exactly reach out a friendly hand to the uninitiated, anyone who takes the time to delve into the works on display should be able to find many forms of edification beneath their surfaces.



A lot of works in the show traverse multiple disciplines — painting, sculpture, photography — using materials and methods circuitously for both their formal and allusive qualities. This is particularly true on the second floor, where Richard Hawkins's collages, inspired by the diaries of Tatsumi Hijikata, who founded the Japanese performance art of Butoh, incorporate clippings of paintings by Klimt, de Kooning, Bacon and Picasso, whose contorted figures had an influence on Butoh. Hawkins's own paintings bring the chain of parallel inspirations full circle. On the same floor, Matt Hoyt's three-dimensional compositions of diminutive objects arranged on wooden planes are both drawing and sculpture. And Werner Herzog's moving five-channel video installation is an ode to the invention of modernism through the prism of classical music and 17th-century etching. Kai Althoff, meanwhile, combines painting and textiles to arrive at sculpture. Apart from Althoff's metallic curtain, which veils the room from the elevators, the Herzog, and two sculptural interruptions (by Joanna Malinowska and K8 Hardy, respectively), all the works on this floor are hanging on the walls. That's as conservative as it is radical, and in this respect the Biennial feels, refreshingly, like a period piece in which the museum is revived as a place for quiet contemplation instead of confounding entertainment.

One floor above, a copy of the Biennial catalog opened to an essay by Andrea Fraser sits at the entrance. This text is in fact Fraser's contribution to the Biennial. And she uses the opportunity to articulate some of the more insidious forms of political hypocrisy and economic complicity that lie hidden in plain view throughout the art world like the "ever-widening gap between what artworks are today (socially and economically), and what artists, curators, critics, and historians say that artworks ... do and mean," or how "the radical rejection of economic rationality [by those involved with art] ... corresponds to the freedom from need afforded by economic privilege." Fraser touches on the elephant in the room: Occupy Wall Street. (During the opening, representatives of the movement were in fact lurking quite loudly outside.) Although the exhibition mostly came together before O.W.S. became active, both are a product of the same time and place. Still, Fraser's artwork registers as operative rather than moralizing. It's a cornerstone of the exhibition in so far as it activates the latent political substance of much of the work in the show.

Like a lot of the artists in the lineup, Fraser, whose medium is cultural critique, cultivates expressive codes from the minutiae of her medium. This is also true for the painters Nicole Eisenman, Jutta Koether and Andrew Masullo. And Liz Deschenes's minimal meditations on the mechanics of photography and Sam Lewitt's gadgety landscapes of spilt, electrically charged ferrofluid, extend this approach into the realm of science.

Dawn Kasper's medium is, well, herself. She has moved the entire contents of her apartment and studio in Los Angeles into a corner of the museum, where she will live and work (but not sleep) throughout the run of the show. The installation is scattered and dynamic: the objects that sit on her bed or in toppling stacks constitute a snapshot self-portrait. When I dropped by, a Buster Keaton VHS, a beat-up paperback of Joan Didion's "Play It as It Lays," a Dita Von Teese pinup, and Julie Ault's monograph on the artist Felix Gonzalez Torres were all on prominent display. Kasper gregariously and

politely engages the curious, the confused and the critical in conversation about who she is and what is on display, which in this case are one and the same.

When the elevator opens onto the fourth floor, visitors might think they have busted into some futuristic lobby to heaven. Everything is brilliant white. There is a quick ticking and ambient swelling sound as if at any moment Laurie Anderson might start to sing. Anderson is not, in fact, in this year's show, but she would be at home here on a floor that is largely devoted to performing arts. For the time being, the floor is configured for the choreographer Sarah Michelson, with stadium seating and a blueprint of the Whitney Museum emblazoned on the vast dance floor. Her company will perform at 4 p.m. daily through March 11. "Backstage" is another suite of galleries where the performers get ready amid art installations and museumgoers.

The piece that juggles, or rather scrambles, these ideas best is Wu Tsang's re-creation of the dressing room of the Los Angeles Latino transgender club the Silver Platter, which is the subject of art videos and a feature documentary the artist has made over the past couple years. Often when an onscreen setting is transposed into an exhibition space, though immersive, the effect can also feel hollow and played out — not the case here at all. Michelson's company uses Tsang's installation as its greenroom. The performers are schizophrenically both at home and out of place: New York modern dancers prepping in a tropical tranny hangout. The room is alive with intimacy, and that's a metaphor that extends to the exhibition more generally.

The big talking point for this Biennial even before it opened was the inclusion of art forms like dance, cinema and music. These fields are not represented by token dilettantes but rather by avant-garde masters, and they have been given proper programming resources and context. Light Industry's Thomas Beard and Ed Halter came on board as curators for this year's film program, which presents the work of a different artist each week. First up is the Boston filmmaker Luther Price, whose grating, abject, hand-ruined reels are stirring and spiritual. (Price's hand-altered slides are also on view on in the galleries on the third and fourth floors.) Also included in the wildly diverse lineup are metaphysical celluloid formalists like Nathaniel Dorsky, dire social documentarians like Laura Poitras, poetic media fusionists like Michael Robinson and even Hollywood-approved auteurs like Kelly Reichardt.

A viewer would have to come to the museum a couple of times a week for the next few months in order to properly synthesize the static contents of the exhibition with its real-time sidebars. For most of its audience, this year's Whitney Biennial will exist as a community of parallel exhibitions. The most poignant room in the museum might be the show-within-a-show of paintings by Forrest Bess curated by Robert Gober. Bess's story shouldn't be diminished by abbreviation, but suffice to say that he was a lifelong outsider who had great influence at the heart of the 20th-century art world, and he remains both underappreciated and a hero to artists today. Gober's gesture reconciles Bess's outsider status while also celebrating it. The Whitney Biennial 2012 does the same for many of its artists, and though it offers few dramatic discoveries, it presents a new model that is broader, more contemporary and more sincere than anything that has come before it.

# SFGATE

## Artist Andrew Masullo shares stuff art is made of

Andrew Masullo, reaching a peak of artistic success, shares the things art is made of and his favorite works created by 'outsiders'

Louise Rafkin

Published 4:00 am, Sunday, May 27, 2012



Painter Andrew Masullo showing his vibrant paintings in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, April 12, 2012.

It's been 31 years since [Andrew Masullo](#), 54, was fired from an office job at New York's [Whitney Museum](#).

Things have changed. His recent return to that museum has been under a slightly different guise; this year, 34 of his bright oil paintings were in the prestigious Biennial, and have been lauded as a highlight of the show. In the past two years, he's had 20 group

shows and a handful of solo exhibitions. Next year, he'll show at the Mary Boone Gallery, considered to be a pinnacle of artistic success.

Masullo's work features colored shapes; some are soothing, others disorienting, some almost jolly. The work has been described as "riotous," "fresh" and "pure."

"They're what people want them to be," he offers. He's right, of course. He eschews the word abstract as much as he does the label of artist. He describes his work as "nonobjective" and his vocation as a "stuff maker."

Since 2005 when he moved here from New York, Masullo has lived in the Sunset District, now in two small [apartments](#) that double as his studio. Walls are covered with several dozen paintings in stages of doneness - sometimes, he says, a painting takes years to resolve. There's little furniture; just stacks of paintings and a few pigskin chairs. This is clearly a work space for someone whose work is his life.

Masullo says he approaches his canvas without intention as to what will eventuate. "It's a safe place to make sense of chaos," he says, noting that for him painting is akin to dreaming. "When you're dreaming, you're in for the ride, you don't know what it's about."

Masullo cites Oct. 27, 1977, as a benchmark in his biography; a printmaking instructor explained the concept of negative and positive space, opening up the idea of nonrepresentational art. "From that day forward I knew what I would do with the rest of my life," he says.

The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2011, with the Biennial praise, Masullo admits he's attained goals once only hoped for. Nevertheless, he remembers lean years, not long past, when he sold off parts of his photography collections in order to keep afloat. Or the lucky break when [Mary Tyler Moore](#), who bought more than a dozen paintings, was photographed in 1995 for [InStyle magazine](#) with his work.

His mantra used to be "kicking and screaming through life," which is enshrined in one of his early pieces now hanging in a hallway. Now, however, he says, he's "humbled" by his success and following a new maxim: "Doing the best job I can."

What's next? "I'll make more stuff," he promises.

An obsessive collector of folk art, Masullo's joyous devotion to work by "outsider" artists is contagious. "A cornucopia of ridiculousness," he says. Masullo, who possesses a keen sense of humor, obviously revels in the work of other "stuff makers" with similar sensibilities; most days he spends an hour on eBay. His most treasured possessions, not surprisingly, are those made by other "stuff makers."

### **Andrew Masullo's objects**

#### **Untitled Painting by Forrest Bess No. 12A**

**Why this painting?** "Small in size but monumental in every way that matters."

**About the artist:** A Texan who died in 1977, Bess had an intense life and a complicated relationship to his sexuality.

**How'd he get it?** Traded for 11 of his paintings.

**"The Bobey Soxer" by George B. Preston**

**How much:** Bought 20 for \$20 at an estate sale.

**Why?** "He has a mania and an intensity that is beyond most people's capability."

**Far-reaching:** Eccentric writing in the work suggests all kinds of stories; Preston, a Portlander, made these between 1929 and 1947.

### **Mr. Mum Cartoon Collection**

**by Irving Phillips**

**How many:** 1,385 - "It's like potato chips, you can't just have one."

**Why?** The deadpan humor and the beautiful drawing. "They remind me of my childhood."

**From?** From his estate and eBay.



**Any more?** "No, I have all I want."

**Folk art: 1930 photo of two girls, with their hair, under glass**

**A bargain at half the price:** Bought at New York's Chelsea flea market for \$75.

**Err ... yuck?** "It's like a glorious gargoyle; I'm both drawn to it and repelled."

**Final word:** "It's a perfect thing."

**"No. 2005" by Masullo (1989) How was it made:** Bought the cube of pins for \$1, added the photos of children cut from medical books.

**Why does it resonate?** "It's relentless, all misery and sadness."

**Delight:** "It's also pretty and the children are so sad."

**Mildred C. and Laurence E. Tilley unnamed vegetable photography (1940s)**

**Origins:** Bought in 1989 for \$25 each, postage extra.

**The delight of them?** "You can see they're vegetables, but it seems like people making them were having a good time."

**Bottom Line:** They're funny, also haunting. Earthy.

**Best thing about the photos:** "I think of the Tilleys as downright serious funsters."

# Post-Post-Millennial: The New Museum Triennial and the Whitney Biennial

By Will Heinrich • 02/28/12 5:36pm

The New Museum's Triennial begins by acknowledging "the impossibility of fully representing a generation in formation." Of course it's impossible, but isn't it still the point? If "The Ungovernables," curated by Eungie Joo, doesn't succeed in finding a final answer, though, it certainly elucidates one problem facing the current generation: the nature of art's relationship to the events of the larger world.

Of those that take a literal, documentary approach, the most successful work is the most direct, beginning with Pratchaya Phinthong's *What I Learned I No Longer Know; the Little I Still Know, I Guessed*, a square stack of dollar bills on the floor. Six and a half bills long by six and a half wide, the stack must be several quadrillion high: these dollars are from Zimbabwe, and their individual denominations run as high as 10 trillion. Slightly less direct are Amalia Pica's *Eavesdropping (Version #2, large)*, a constellation of clear, blue, and red drinking glasses—including one reverse-Coca-Cola-shape glass for 7-Up, "the uncola"—glued to the wall, and Danh Võ's *WE THE PEOPLE*, life-size copper reproductions of sections of the Statue of Liberty, fabricated in China and leaning against a wall. Possibly too direct are the Propeller Group's five looping videos on five both literally and figuratively inward-facing screens, recording a marketing firm discussing rebranding communism, and Pilvi Takala's *The Trainee*, a project—documented with video, PowerPoint and ephemera—which consisted of pretending to work, while making a point of visibly not working, at the professional services company Deloitte for a month.

Those who take a head-in-the-sand, fantasy approach include Adrián Villar Rojas with *A Person Loved Me*, a giant, branching, machinelike object made of cracking clay and cement that scrapes the ceiling and looks like a prop from a Miyazaki movie.

But if the artist takes account of the larger world, the art will take care of itself, as in Lee Kit's installation *Scratching the Table Surface and Something More*, for which he scratched the same place on a table for two years, until the varnished surface gave way to reveal the wood beneath; Hu Xiaoyuan's *Wood*, in which she covered 31 pieces of

lumber with white silk painted with exact copies of the grain; Gabriel Sierra's ladder, level, table and two-by-four set vertically and sideways and flush into custom-made holes in the wall; and especially Iman Issa's *Material for a Sculpture Representing a Bygone Era of Luxury and Decadence*, a brass disc on a jointed wooden tail that's a cross between Akhenaten and Brancusi.

The final answer, or anyway the most complete and recent one, is uptown at the Whitney Biennial, curated by Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders. Enormously wide-ranging but completely coherent and decisively focused, the show has a kind of watercolor aesthetic of browns and pale yellows, of slideshows and collage. A decade or more after the collapse of our post-millennial hopes, it suggests, we have retracted our ambitions back within material boundaries. We're dealing with history again as if it were the dawn of time, or of the 20th century—working next to chaos rather than against it, abandoning the aspiration to universal principles, reaching for primal forms and totemic animal figures, making each shape its own fresh compromise. The only difference is that this time we're not hoping to learn anything. And after decades of burdensome overthinking, we're now finally dealing with art history the way Vodoun deals with Catholic hagiology, cherry-picking figures of power for ceremonies of our own while blithely ignoring the hierarchical systems of their original context.

Wu Tsang's *GREEN ROOM*, furnished with low leather couches, dressing mirrors, red lights, a coat rack, a wall of cubbies, and perpendicular screens on two walls looping a video about a transsexual Honduran finding a new life in L.A.'s Silver Platter club, functions as a dressing room for other artist's performers as well as an installation and lounge for the public. Shooting for a Borges story but looking like HBO, it lands somewhere between the two. L.A. artist Dawn Kasper has installed herself and all her worldly possessions, including an electrically rotating tennis racket and a copy of *A Clockwork Orange* but excepting "some of [her] socks and underwear," in the Whitney for the duration of the show as *THIS COULD BE SOMETHING IF I LET IT*. And scattered around the museum are 85 framed, nine-inch-by-six-inch black-and-white book pages, which illustrate various celestial glories in the much reduced, black-and-white way we imagine them and altogether constitute Lutz Bacher's *The Celestial Handbook*.

Sarah Michelson's *Devotion Study #1 – The American Dancer* reimagines the postperformance sublime as a lonely gymkhana in which the artist, in a brown body suit and horse mask, paces around a fenced-in enclosure with gray architectural drawings on the floor. A green neon light in the form of a woman's featureless face hangs on the wall and is reflected in a window. The textured, weird, patently unbalanced paintings of Forrest Bess, who lived in near-total isolation as a fisherman in Texas (though he did

show work in New York with Betty Parsons), are given their own well-deserved room: Bess, who died as a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, was obsessed with transforming himself—surgically as well as metaphysically—into a hermaphrodite, and this exhibit realizes for the first time his desire to display his meta-medical treatise next to his paintings. Lutz Bacher's *Pipe Organ* is a Hammond rigged up to play chords automatically, with tin organ pipes, looking like ballistic missiles, leaning over it. Werner Herzog's *Hearsay of the Soul*, also in its own room, is portentous.

A series of Andrew Masullo's fabulous oil paintings stand in for the power of serene concentration to shut out larger existential problems. Made with sugary, bright, unmixed colors and hard-edged shapes that seem to date from the '60s, each of the 34 numbered canvases establishes and wrestles with its own subtle compositional problem. Richard Hawkins's haunting *Ankoku* collages reconsider the origins of *butoh*, juxtaposing art-historical images with strangely written short English texts and Japanese characters. Nicole Eisenman's *Untitled*, consisting of 45 mixed-media monotypes, dissolves and recongels the possibilities of the face. (One monotype shows a Matt Groening-style alien; another, a naked little girl whose genitals look like a fortune cookie.)

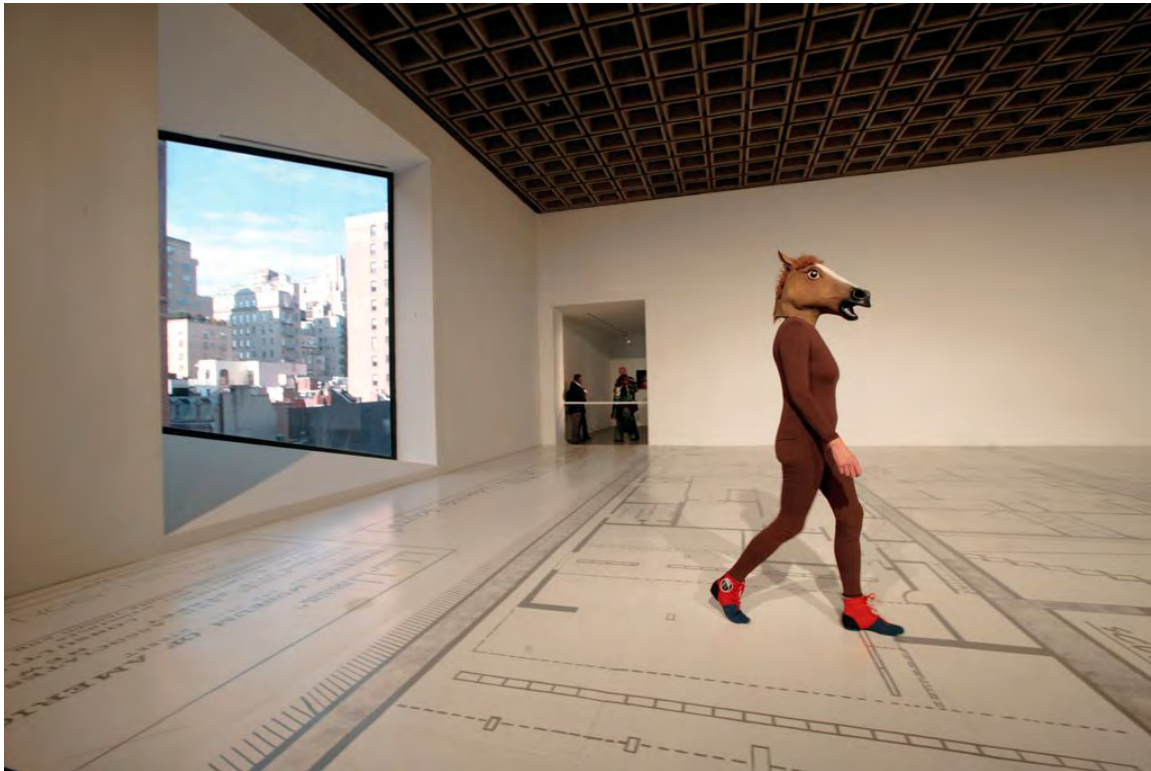
Joanna Malinowska has built a "Wall for *Horse Nation*"—the wall is sheetrock, and *Horse Nation* is a schmaltzy painting of wild horses by Native American activist and federal prisoner Leonard Peltier. Kate Levant has made a collage with materials scavenged from an abandoned house in Detroit. Tom Thayer's mixed-media pieces fold up into images of swans and storks. Matt Hoyt's superlatively quiet small sculptures, arranged in groups on low shelves, pull in where everything else pushes out. A watercolor by Charles Demuth hangs within an installation by Nick Mauss.

In the fourth-floor mezzanine, Lucy Raven's *What Manchester Does Today, the Rest of the World Does Tomorrow* consists of a player piano and three paper music rolls, which play three variations, written with Jason Moran, of LCD Soundsystem's 2010 "Dance Yrself Clean." It is, Ms. Raven has said, "a way for the player piano to play its own elegy." But the beautiful thing is that because the piano's playing again, it's not an elegy.

# The New York Times

## A Survey of a Different Color 2012 Whitney Biennial

By ROBERTA SMITH MARCH 1, 2012



**2012 Whitney Biennial** A dancer in Sarah Michelson's "Devotion Study #1 — The American Dancer." Credit Librado Romero/The New York Times

One of the best Whitney Biennials in recent memory may or may not contain a lot more outstanding art than its predecessors, but that's not the point. The 2012 incarnation is a new and exhilarating species of exhibition, an emerging curatorial life form, at least for New York.

Possessed of a remarkable clarity of vision, a striking spatial intelligence and a generous stylistic inclusiveness, it places on an equal footing art objects and time-based art — not just video and performance art but music, dance, theater, film — and does so on a scale and with a degree of aplomb we have not seen before in this town. In a way that is at once superbly ordered and open-ended, densely structured and, upon first encounter, deceptively unassuming, the exhibition manages both to reinvent the signature show of the [Whitney](#) Museum of American Art and to offer a bit of redemption for the out-of-control, money-saturated art world.



Largely avoiding both usual suspects and blue-chip galleries, this Biennial tacitly separates art objects from the market and moves them closer to where they come from, artists, whose creative processes and passion for other artists' work are among the show's unstated yet evident themes, along with documentary, color, collage, sexual identity and abstraction. It is a show in continual flux, and will to some extent be different each time you visit, right up to its final day. Multiple visits are warranted, in fact necessary, to get a true sense of this show's richness and the improvisatory energy it brings to the Whitney.

The Biennial has been organized by Elisabeth Sussman, the Whitney's curator of photography, and Jay Sanders, a writer, independent curator and former art gallery director known for his erudition in areas of poetry and performance. They have worked in tandem with Thomas Beard and Ed Halter, of [Light Industry](#), a film-and-electronic-art space in Brooklyn, who guided the exhibition's ambitious film and video program. From what I had time to preview, the film selections include at least two of the show's major works: Frederick Wiseman's 2010 excursion into unnarrated documentary, "Boxing Gym," and Thom Andersen's three-hour "Los Angeles Plays Itself," a meditation on the discrepancy between movies and real life in largely architectural terms that is as enthralling as it is dispiriting.

Another filmmaker who stands out is Werner Herzog, who contributes "Hearsay of the Soul," a ravishing five-screen digital projection, to his first-ever art show. An unexpected celebration of the handmade by the technological — and a kind of collage — it combines greatly magnified close-ups of the voluptuous landscape etchings of the Dutch artist Hercules Segers (1589-1638), whom Herzog considers "the father of modernity in art," with some justification. The shifting scroll-like play of images is set to sonorous music, primarily by the Dutch cellist and composer [Ernst Reijseger](#), who also appears briefly on screen, playing his heart out. I dare you not to cry.

The curators both signal and facilitate the show's new equality of objects and events by their ingenious decision to use the museum's vaulting fourth floor gallery, with its big Cyclopsian window overlooking Madison Avenue, for performing-arts events. In so doing they also remove from contention a space that in past Biennials has tended to encourage big, show-stopping, sometimes bombastic, implicitly macho art objects. (As for the art objects they do include, these tend to be works of modest scale, which they have arranged on the second and third floors in spare, open-plan displays that are almost startling in their avoidance of the usual Biennial overcrowding.)

With its putative center stage used simply, if grandly, as that — a stage that will pass from artist to artist — the Biennial defuses itself a bit, in a good way. The first occupant is the innovative New York-based British choreographer Sarah Michelson, whose work combines aspects of performance, installation and dance. Her set, which involves a floor painted with a giant enlargement of the architectural blueprints for the Whitney building and a big green neon portrait of herself, is one of the Biennial's most wonderful moments, albeit only until March 11. After that the choreographer Michael Clark, another Briton based in New York, will reconfigure the space and, working with a combination of

trained and untrained dancers, will conduct two weeks of open rehearsals followed by two weeks of performances.

There are also performances in the second- and third-floor galleries, where more traditional artworks are in the majority. Georgia Sagri, who seems to specialize in antic Dada-flavored spoken-word art, will give 16 performances in her installation on the fifth-floor mezzanine. On the third floor Dawn Kasper, whose sensibility tends more toward Beat, has filled a gallery with most of her belongings, including a bed, stacks of books, numerous small appliances, artworks and art supplies. She will be on hand for the run of the show, working, visiting with the public, playing music or perhaps taking a nap. The work is titled “This Could Be Something if I Let It.” I look forward to the exit interview.



Joanna Malinowska's sculpture "From the Canyons to the Stars." Credit Librado Romero/The New York Times

This is a deeply artist-friendly show that revels almost tenderly in the various processes — personal, social, visual, physical, historical, political — that culminate in works of art, whether objects or art events. It repeatedly equates the curatorial with the artistic, in part by inviting participating artists to organize mini-shows or mini-festivals of film or music within the exhibition.

One such venture is a display, organized by the artist Robert Gober in a gallery on the museum's second floor, of the small, visionary semi-abstract canvases of Forrest Bess (1911-77), a Texas fisherman who lived on the Gulf Coast, painted motifs that came to

him in dreams and tried to bring out the woman in himself by acts of self-surgery that turned him into a quasi-hermaphrodite. Bess wanted to exhibit documentation of his surgeries beside his paintings, but his New York dealer and frequent correspondent, the legendary advocate of the Abstract Expressionists Betty Parsons, declined. His wish comes true here, and the artist-dealer friendship, so basic to much new art, is folded into the show.

Bess's paintings, like Mr. Herzog's and Mr. Wiseman's contributions, are among the show's touchstones. Bess's compressed, evocative forms find echo in Vincent Fecteau's small voluminous painted sculptures, which start in the vicinity of Ken Price, John Chamberlain and Frank Gehry and achieve a convoluted density all their own. They look great in the company of the bright metamorphosing geometries that inhabit the small canvases of Andrew Masullo (who, as it happens, owns two of the Bess paintings on view).

Meanwhile something of Bess's proto-body art echoes in a video installation by Wu Tsang, whose work is also a standout in the New Museum's current triennial. Here his effort is a video installation that takes the form of a green room to be used by performers on the fourth floor. When it's not in use for that purpose the videos take visitors on a tour of the Silver Platter, a Latino Los Angeles nightclub frequented by transvestites, serving up a heady combination of lush atmosphere, personal confession and social criticism.

Numerous artists partake of more than one medium. On video Joanna Malinowska turns a famous Joseph Beuys performance into an American-Indian ritual and translates Duchamps's bottle rack into a tepee-sized amalgam of fake bison tusks that is the show's largest sculpture.

The short films of the underappreciated underground filmmaker Luther Price — one of the Biennial's stars — are part of the film program. But in one of the third-floor galleries Mr. Price also contributes some of the show's best pictorial art: projections of his lavishly scarified slides, pieced together from found film, filigreed with mold, textured with dust.

In these entrancingly delicate, implicitly violent works, life, chance, obsessive art making and an intense artistic psyche descended from Pollock, Rauschenberg and Jack Smith — if not Hercules Segers — flashes before your eyes. Mr. Price's fleeting images engage in a lively dialogue with their neighbors: the similarly shape-shifting images in a suite of 44 monotypes and one terrific painting by Nicole Eisenman; the shimmering, iridescent abstract installations — one vertical, one horizontal — of Kate Levant and Sam Lewitt.

In liking this show a lot I'm not saying that it is perfect, or that I like all of it. It could use a higher percentage of strong art objects and in this regard suffers from a lack of hard, open-eyed looking. It is, after all, a [Whitney Biennial](#). It has irritating moments of preciousness and blank spots where it dwindles off into inconsequentiality. But at this juncture such faults seem preferable to overweening, overproduced machismo. And often what appears slight will gain strength if you return and look again, more closely.

In addition artists can gain substance as they change contexts. One of the show's youngest participants is a 28-year-old sculptor named Cameron Crawford, whose constructions on the third floor feel a tad Post-Minimally derivative. Yet Mr. Crawford makes a memorable impression in the show's catalog, where each artist has been given several pages to use in any way: write a work, invite others to write, reproduce photographs or graphics. He republishes a piece of his own writing, a fascinating kind of prose-poetry called "Elegance Is Refusal." If his sculpture ever rises to the level of his words, he will have done something.

With various time-based art works waiting in the wings — films by Mike Kelley and George Kuchar, a theater work by Richard Maxwell, a multimedia performance by Charles Atlas — this exhibition is an unfolding, in many ways uncontainable celebration. Catch as much as you can.

"Whitney Biennial 2012" runs through May 27 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street; (212) 570-3600, [whitney.org](http://whitney.org).



# The New York Times

## Biennial Tweaks Its Boundaries

By CAROL VOGEL FEB. 16, 2012



“Concern, Crush, Desire” (2011), by Nick Mauss, at the coming Whitney Biennial. Credit Collection of Nicoletta Fiorucci, 303 Gallery, New York, and Galerie Neu, Berlin

It has never happened before, and it will be another six years before the New York contemporary art planets align the same way again: Two sprawling contemporary surveys — the New Museum’s second-ever Triennial, which opened Wednesday, and the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#)’s 76th Biennial, opening March 1 — will be on view simultaneously.

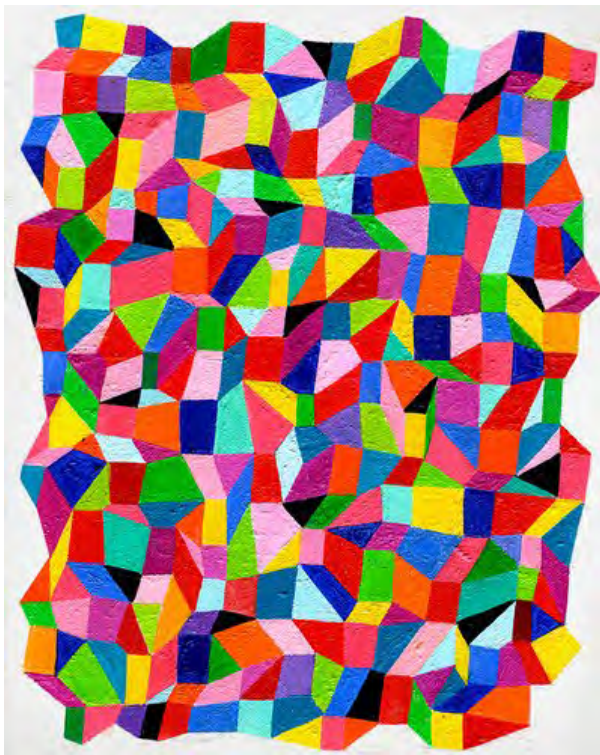
Given that different curators inevitably have different views, and that these two institutions also have distinct missions, it’s not surprising that they have come up with very different takes on the art of the moment. The New Museum has cast its net internationally, while the Whitney, being dedicated to American art, will be a bit more homegrown, although the biennial will include artists born elsewhere who happen to live and work here. Only one artist — the Los Angeles-based Wu Tsang, who identifies



himself as “transfeminine” and “transguy” and who mixes art and politics in performances, filmmaking and installations — will be included in both shows.

The New Museum’s exhibition has been given a title, “The Ungovernables,” inspired by the 1976 student uprisings in South Africa, a term that, as its curator Eungie Joo put it, “could refer to an organized resistance,” and that suggests a show defined by political commentary from a group of artists who are mostly in their 20s and 30s.

The curators behind this year’s biennial — Elisabeth Sussman, a longtime Whitney curator, and Jay Sanders, a former director of the Greene Naftali Gallery in Chelsea and an independent curator — said they purposely stayed away from any one theme, and while politics is obliquely addressed in some works, both see the contemporary art world today as too multifaceted to distill.



“5147,” a painting by Andrew Masullo, from 2009-10, at the Whitney. Credit Collection of the artist, Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles

“We wanted to be incredibly open,” Ms. Sussman said, over lunch at Untitled, the Whitney’s restaurant, one recent afternoon. “We didn’t care if an artist had been in a biennial before. We wanted to show all different sorts of art.” The result is a group that includes seasoned practitioners like Robert Gober, Mike Kelley and Nicole Eisenman along with several younger, emerging artists whom few people will probably recognize. The age range is broad too, from artists in their late 20s to some in their 70s.

In other ways this biennial is modest. Whereas in past years it burst out of the Whitney’s Madison Avenue home, spilling into Central Park and the Park Avenue Armory, this time, as in 2010, it will be contained within the museum. The number of artists on view

has shrunk from the 100 who were included in the 2006 exhibition — flusher times — to about half that number this year. “We were reacting against biennials where too much was crammed into the galleries so that no artist was shown to their best advantage,” Mr. Sanders said. “We tended to hold back and only pick things that really spoke to us.”

While the curators were careful to represent a spectrum of visual-art mediums — painting, sculpture, installation, video — there is new emphasis on the performing arts this year: dance, theater, music, film. For the first time the museum has removed most of the walls on its fourth floor, transforming it into a 6,000-square-foot space for performances. “By putting it on a dedicated floor it is front and center,” Mr. Sanders said. “It’s going to be the largest dance floor in New York after the Park Avenue Armory.”

Films, meanwhile, will be shown in timed screenings in a gallery on the second floor. These moves are a means “of getting away from little black spaces with film and video or performances within the galleries,” he added. “That had gotten tedious to us.” An assortment of high-profile figures like the choreographer Michael Clark, the theater director Richard Maxwell and the filmmakers Werner Herzog and Frederick Wiseman will be represented, along with a selection of younger and emerging talents.



Tom Thayer's "This Life Is Nothing More Than Waiting for the Sky to Open" (2011). Credit Tom Thayer, Collection of Michael Coppola and Ann Zumwalt, Derek Eller Gallery, New York

Visitors beware: While the public can watch performers rehearsing during the day while the biennial is on, tickets are required for many of the events. (They can be bought on the museum's [Web site](#).) “Our ideal viewer is going to come seven or eight times,” Mr. Sanders said. “We are treating this as though it is a performing arts center.”



Tom Thayer that will include collages, animations and delicate cutouts of human figures and storks so ephemeral one expects them to fly around the galleries by themselves in the night. “It’s my utopia,” Mr. Thayer said, as he worked on his installation the other afternoon.

Mike Kelley fans will see one of the last works he created before he died at 57, apparently by suicide, this month. On view will be videos that are part of his “Mobile Homestead,” a full-scale model of the suburban house in Detroit where he grew up. “It’s all about public art and the city of Detroit, its collapse and eventual gentrification,” Mr. Sanders said.

The symbiotic relationship between fashion and art has been prevalent for a while now, and the biennial will include photographs by K8 Hardy, a feminist artist who will also stage a fashion show on the museum’s fourth floor, pairing it with work by Oscar Tuazon, an artist known for his architectural sculptures. His pieces will start out in the museum’s lobby but eventually be moved to become the runway for Ms. Hardy’s fashion show.

The current vogue for abstraction, both in painting and sculpture, has not been forgotten. Two San Francisco artists will share the same gallery space on the third floor, Andrew Masullo with his small vibrantly colored canvases, and Vincent Fecteau with a group of sculptures made from cement, gypsum and clay.

And of course it wouldn’t be a Whitney biennial without at least one outlandish installation. This year it’s by Dawn Kasper, a Los Angeles artist who has literally moved into the museum. “Basically everything I own is here,” Ms. Kasper said the other afternoon, wearing blue jeans, a hoodie and wool cap and standing in the middle of a chaotic space on the third floor containing her bed, piles of clothes and stacks of books: “Blade Runner,” “Simply [Vegetarian](#),” “One Hundred Years of Solitude,” to name a few. Some of her own photographs and collages were propped along the perimeter of the space, her “nomadic studio,” as she calls it. Throughout the biennial, Ms. Kasper plans to make collages and drawings — part real-life studio practice, part performance. While the museum won’t let her actually spend the night there, she said she planned to “take lots of naps.”



# The New York Times

## Painting by Numbers, to Whitney Biennial

By CAROL KINOMARCH 22, 2012



Andrew Masullo at home in San Francisco. Credit Annie Tritt for The New York Times

### San Francisco

Call the painter Andrew Masullo anything you like, as long as you don't call him an artist. "I don't like the word," he proclaimed one day last month, soon after welcoming me to his modest apartment cum studio here on the outskirts of the city. "Everybody is an artist nowadays, and it doesn't mean anything anymore. I believe in 'Art is spelled with a capital A,' like Florine Stettheimer wrote."

The space was crammed floor to ceiling with his vividly colored canvases, as well as the numerous odd collections of paintings, ephemera and photographs that he has amassed over the years. Mr. Masullo started his tour by showing off a bookcase filled with material related to some of his art-historical idols, including Stettheimer, Forrest Bess,



Joseph Cornell and the German painter Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, a founder of the early abstractionist collective Abstraction-Création.

Then he suddenly invoked the memory of Harry S. Truman, whom he called “my favorite president.”

“When they asked Truman if he did a good job as president,” Mr. Masullo observed, “he said, ‘I just did my duty, and history will do me justice.’ That’s it. With me it’s the same thing.”

Duty may not be the first thing that comes to mind when looking at Mr. Masullo’s oil paintings. Although they are modestly sized, they are typically covered with hard-edged geometric shapes and painted in vibrant, eye-popping hues. Sometimes their sparsely spaced forms can suggest the spiritual order of de Stijl; other times the canvas is so riotous that the foreground and background seem to continually flip places with each other, like a visual perception game. His Los Angeles dealer, Daniel Weinberg, calls them “big paintings on a small scale.”

But at 54, having toiled as a highly respected painter’s painter for decades, and having shown with countless galleries in New York, Mr. Masullo is finally achieving wider renown, in part because of his inclusion in this year’s Whitney Biennial, where 34 of his paintings are on view through May 27. One of only a few living painters in the performance-heavy display, Mr. Masullo has been acknowledged by many as a star of the show.

The curators chose his work because “it felt very fresh to us at this moment,” said Jay Sanders, who organized the Biennial with Elisabeth Sussman. In contrast to much contemporary painting, “it’s not totally backed up by a lot of theory or a conceptual practice,” he said. “It’s pure painting. And it looks fantastic.” (It’s also a great foil for the Biennial’s Forrest Bess display; in fact Mr. Masullo owns two of the Bess paintings on view.)

Mr. Masullo’s pure painting certainly seems to be having its moment. In the last two years his work has been tapped for 20 group exhibitions. He has also had four solo gallery shows — or five, if you count his exhibition at Volta earlier this month. (Most of the Whitney paintings are drawn from his 2010 show with the New York gallery [Feature Inc.](#) and his 2011 show at Mr. Weinberg’s [gallery](#).) Next spring Mr. Masullo will have a solo show at Mary Boone Gallery in Chelsea. “Oh my God!” he recalled squealing when he heard the news. “My name is going to be on that wall!” But Ms. Boone had better not call Mr. Masullo’s paintings abstract, for that is another one of his pet peeves.

“Abstract is one of those terms, like artist, that means nothing,” he said. He prefers “nonobjective,” popularized by Kandinsky. “My paintings are nonobjective because there’s no object in them,” he said. “I didn’t find a shadow or a lily pond someplace that I was inspired by. I work with just regular light bulbs, and I start from scratch, and I never know where I’m starting or where I’m going.”

He seems to have taken a similar approach to his career. Raised in Roselle Park, N.J., in a working-class family, Mr. Masullo didn't even think of taking an art class until he was at Rutgers University, majoring in languages. After a teacher explained the concept of negative and positive space, he had an epiphany. "That was the moment that I realized this thing called art was not about representation," Mr. Masullo said. "It was about seeing the world in a different kind of way."

His first project in his senior year drawing class was a sketch of a campus courtyard; he numbered it and entered it into a notebook. (That record keeping, which he maintained, gave rise to the titling system he uses today; each work, rather than being called "untitled," is known by its number.)

After graduating he moved to New York and got a job as an administrative secretary at the Whitney. That's where he saw his first Biennial, in 1981, and where he was first thunderstruck by the tiny abstractions of Forrest Bess. "I didn't do my office work sometimes," he said, "because I was too busy being excited about stuff."

Not surprisingly he was fired after about a year. Soon after, in 1982, he made his first "credible" piece, he said, a French grammar book whose pages he inked with scribbles, inspired by the diaries of Jo Hopper, Edward's wife. It won him a place in his first exhibition, a two-person show in 1983 at the East Village gallery International With Monument.

Throughout the 1980s Mr. Masullo was a relatively hot name in that neighborhood; he even had a patron, the Swiss dealer and collector Thomas Ammann. Much of his work was made with found materials, resulting in Cornell-like boxes, puzzles, collages and artists' books; totemic sculptures, like bottles filled with semen and grave dirt; and a vast variety of paintings, some incorporating numbers and text, some made on planks of wood or junk-shop pictures and photographs. "As the seemingly countless small works in his fifth solo exhibition prove," Roberta Smith [wrote in The New York Times](#) in 1989, "Andrew Masullo can make art out of anything."

But in 1991 he decided to change tack, and spent a year making dozens of paint-by-numbers portraits of dogs and cats — "a goof," he explained, on the '80s notion of artists hiring fabricators to execute their ideas. The experience impelled him to reject content entirely. "I wanted to make paintings that were completely by me, with shapes and colors and hard edges," he said. "I wanted to see if I could make a painting from scratch that had no content other than what it was about."

That's how he embarked on a strain of pure painting that seemed quite radical at the time: working with a prestretched canvas and unmixed oil paints, and figuring out his composition as his brush moved across the canvas. "I want to be lost from the beginning," Mr. Masullo said. Often he could (and still does) spend years painting and repainting a canvas until finding the right way to finish it.

Although Mr. Masullo continued to show widely — moving between blue-chip dealers like André Emmerich and Joan Washburn, and newer galleries in Chelsea — he found it increasingly hard to live in New York. So seven years ago he decamped to San Francisco and started approaching dealers long distance. That's how he got in touch with Hudson, the owner of [Feature Inc.](#), who had been following his work for years. Another painter connected him to Mr. Weinberg. Once again Mr. Masullo's career began to take off, although he now maintains it was ordained.

“When I got fired from the Whitney,” he said, “I told myself, ‘They’re kicking me out the back door, but one day they’re going to invite me in through the front.’ I didn’t know it was going to be 31 years, but I knew it would happen.”

## BOSTON

### Andrew Masullo STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY

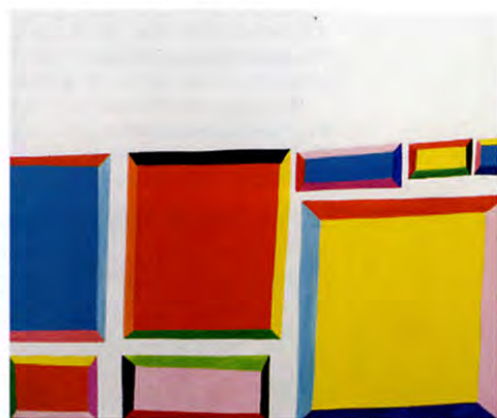
Andrew Masullo's abstract paintings pose formal dilemmas, linguistic slippages, and categorical paradoxes that turn formal analysis into a game—and perhaps that's the point. To attempt to describe these pieces is to willingly abandon the possibility of fixity, as his work has an uncanny way of being perpetually *in advance* of its pursuer. Stated another way, Masullo's work, which grew out of the 1980s East Village scene in New York, performs a set of operations that unmoor the term "abstract painting," leading viewers in unexpected directions—obliging us to begin the game again.

This process of repetition, by carving out a new point of arrival and departure with each of the twenty-five canvases presented in this exhibition, produces variations that are best considered comparatively. For instance, if in *5342*, 2011, sinuous surfaces of different colors meander around the painting's edges to create a glaring "lacuna" of white in the center of the composition, then in *5001*, 2008–2009, a likewise "empty" space is framed by an equally vivacious band of hard-edge facets and curvilinear perturbations. Both works activate the modernist tension between figure and ground and the problem of the framing edge, evoking Morris Louis's evanescent "veils" and Kenneth Noland's taut "stripes." Yet Masullo's biomorphic and phallic bulges insinuate the presence of the pleasure principle as an irrepressible formal substance. Similarly, if in *5157*, 2009–10, monochromatic rectangles of diverse colors and dimensions hover above and below a pink-and-white ground, then in *5234*, 2009–11, reductive abstraction has been sliced and diced into smaller units, proverbially woven into a multihued

tapestry separated from a broad yellow surface by a thin red band. For a viewer confronted with these paradigms of twentieth-century avant-garde aesthetics, simultaneously seeing the likes of Kasimir Malevich and Yves Klein in the work is inevitable. But Masullo transposes modernism's heroic self-presentation into a minor key: The diminutive size of his monochromes and their decorative leanings allow them to read also as objects of play, craft, and design. However charged this territory may be, to identify merely the historic references in Masullo's work is to tumble into a well-laid trap—one set to reveal the beholder's own belatedness in understanding that, foremost, these paintings are producing new conditions of possibility.

Despite this exhibition's constellation of filiations, Masullo is no run-of-the-mill third- or fourth-generation modernist. If anything, what his work suggests—for example, *5266*, 2010–11, with its heaping of colored planes pressed against a stark white surface—is that contemporary abstraction cannot be determined or defined by any single identity or index, but rather that it ceaselessly fosters new connections. The off-tilt *5264*, 2010–11, and the dizzying *5113*, 2008, belong to a world of experiences associated with commercial color samples, wallpapers, notepad doodles, and low-fidelity video games. Yet Masullo's handwork, veering from nonchalant to brazen and obsessive, never allows these references to settle into facile codification. And here I do not mean into a literal signification, but rather into a comfortable and consistent notion of what abstract painting is. Only adding to this ambivalence are Masullo's titles, which are assigned chronologically, but not until a work has been completed. The numerical logic of each title may seem at odds with the relative date of a given work's inception, which the artist also always includes. In Masullo's hands, "painting" and "abstraction" not only are susceptible to constant modification but are always revitalizing themselves by dismantling their own authority.

—Nuit Banai



Andrew Masullo,  
*5264*, 2010–11, oil on  
canvas, 16 x 20".



BOSTON

**ANDREW MASULLO  
STEVEN ZEVITAS**

Andrew Masullo's lively and colorful small paintings inhabit a spirited world of non-objective charm. In the San Francisco-based artist's second exhibition at Steven Zevitas, 25 recent oils on canvas (ranging in size from 8 by 10 to 24 by 30 inches) feature idiosyncratic creamy layers of paint and a vast variety of flat shapes and patterns, both organic and hard-edge. He titles the works with sequential numbers to prevent the viewer from being unduly influenced by words. Masullo, who has long championed the visionary painter Forrest Bess (1911-1977), denies any personal symbology. He works spontaneously, seated on his studio floor, on several prestretched canvases at a time, using a rainbow of colors straight from the tube to produce high-keyed, unabashedly joyful paintings.

Masullo first received attention in 1983 for his paintings and collages exhibited at International with Monument, in New York's East Village, a celebrated outpost that showed such Neo-Geo artists as Peter Halley and Ashley Bickerton. Since the 1990s, he has evolved into a quirky antitheoretical artist. Color, form and composition reign supreme. Although Masullo claims that there are no allusions to the outside world in his art, his paintings at times are evocative. 5266 (2010-11), for instance, suggests a cubistic landscape. The buttery white upper half of the 24-by-20-inch canvas could be sky, and the lower half sports a kaleidoscope of bright, faceted planes. Masullo's brush also gives

rise to loopy organic shapes, as in 5260 (2010-11), in which a pile of balloonlike forms evokes sagging mammary glands, akin to works by Louise Bourgeois. Hugging a deep orange-red right angle on the lower left, this lopsided comic group in pink, orange, yellow and black is interspersed with tongue-like protrusions in red, blue and green.

Conversely, 5352 (2011) seems to reject the organic with a back-to-basics variation on the de Stijl esthetic: a stepped array of four abutting rectangles in pink, green, red and blue is topped by a thick black line and a yellow plane above. Here Masullo riffs on the artistic purity and precision of Mondrian and his cohorts while rejecting their stringent formulas, austerity and utopian vision.

Whatever semblances to other art or nature Masullo's shapes conjure, his delightful paintings clearly elude descriptive narrative. The sophisticated naïveté of his diminutive works provides a monumental addition to an art world that has embraced the scale and/or formal aspects of similar abstractionists, including Thomas Nozkowski, Raoul De Keyser and Mary Heilmann.

—Francine Koslow Miller



Andrew Masullo:  
5260, 2010-11,  
oil on canvas,  
20 by 16 inches;  
at Steven Zevitas.



# The Boston Globe

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2011

**ANDREW MASULLO:  
Recent Paintings**

At: Steven Zevitas Gallery,  
450 Harrison Ave.,  
through Dec. 3. 617-778-5265,  
stevenzevitasgallery.com



**Small revelations**

Andrew Masullo paints on his lap. That explains the smallish scale and strange intimacy of his abstract paintings, up at Steven Zevitas Gallery. The artist has been painting for years and has developed something of a cult following, perhaps because he appears to disregard theory, trends, and concepts in order simply to paint.

Not that we cannot ascribe theories and apply the art world to Masullo. He uses candy colors and flat forms that sometimes deepen to suggest quite shallow space. His works are unassuming, yet focused and even weird — like Milton Avery's paintings, in mood, if not in imagery and tone.

Escher-like patterns appear, such as the conjoined diamond shapes undulating through "5266." Two forms square off across a bubblegum-pink ground in "5239," a jagged red shape cuffed in white and a royal blue cloud. And "5260" fills one red corner with a bevy of swelling bright shapes; it's like a high window looking in on a balloon-blowing contest.

The accumulation of 25 such canvases is even more riveting than a single piece. One is like a shy fellow at a cocktail party, fading into the background. With several, the party somehow becomes a shy person's paradise, and the conversation turns in wonderful directions. Masullo's paintings address and coax to life small, sometimes hidden things. When tended to, they thrive.

# The New York Times

## ANDREW MASULLO: 'Recent Paintings'

By ROBERTA SMITH NOV. 25, 2010

*Feature*

*131 Allen Street, near Rivington Street*

*Lower East Side*

*Through Dec. 5*

If Andrew Masullo's truculent, hard-won but nonetheless joyful paintings can be said to involve a family of forms — and they can — you could also say that many of its members appear to be adopted. His paintings' familial resemblances reside foremost in size (small), surface (matte, brushy), color (saturated), edges (hard, but unruled) and spatial illusion (not much).

In contrast, the repertory of flat shapes that Mr. Masullo has evolved in the 27 years he has been exhibiting in New York is all over the place. Some motifs have the graphic forcefulness of emblems or flags; others seem derived from letters. Quite a few push the figure-ground relationship in all sorts of very different directions. There are instances of surface-filling stripes and patterns and one work in which the inspiration seems to be an ornate picture frame.

In the brief interview that serves as the press release at Feature, Mr. Masullo says his work is not abstract, but doesn't elaborate. Perhaps he sees his efforts as objects, or as the occasions of intuitive processes so particular and unpredictable that abstraction is beside the point, or as depictions of things that he prefers not to specify.

This is Mr. Masullo's 12th solo show in a New York gallery and first in six years. It is also his first at Feature, where his work seems completely at home. He is due a small museum survey that would tie together his paintings with the quirky books and collages he made in the 1980s, when his work was one of the fresher sights on the East Village art scene. Its freshness persists.

# Los Angeles Times

## AROUND THE GALLERIES

[September 28, 2007](#) | David Pagel | Special to The Times

Centripetal forces of color, texture

If you like color, its abundance will make you feel like a kid in a candy shop when you visit Andrew Masullo's second solo show in Los Angeles. His first was in 1990.

At the Daniel Weinberg Gallery, "Andrew Masullo: Paintings 1992-2007" makes a great first impression. Joy, delight and unmitigated happiness spill from the glowing rainbow of luscious colors the New York artist has arranged in basic shapes, snappy patterns and lovely clusters on very small canvases. It's a supersaturated sampler of visual pleasures: exuberant in their high-keyed emotions, no-nonsense in their decisiveness, intimate in their nakedness.

And the exhibition gets even better when you look closely at its 47 paintings, beautifully hung in two galleries. Some are not much bigger than business cards. Most are smaller than ordinary sheets of paper.

Among such pint-sized neighbors, the biggest, a 2-by-2-foot diamond, has the presence of a compressed mural. Its interlinked strips of color pull your eyes into its empty center with centripetal forcefulness.

All of Masullo's works are titled with a number in the order they were finished -- like a store's inventory. The ones here range from "2811," a cut-rate mandala, to "4782," an abstract still life with architectural solidity.

Masullo combines colors and shapes (not to mention textures) with such inventiveness that it's hard to find more than two works that seem to be cut from the same cloth, much less that resemble one another. Many have the presence of paintings within paintings, with each tiny part doing its own thing, regardless of what's going on around it.

There's more to these works than cheerfulness. Their gleefulness is complicated by their equal and opposite familiarity with failure, regret, sadness.

The overall impression they make is not of an avant-garde artist going out of his way to break rules, like many self-conscious careerists, but of a passionate tinkerer trying to hold it together long enough to get the job done. That combination of humility and ambition is profoundly human, and it gives Masullo's paintings their poignancy.

# ARTFORUM

## Los Angeles Reviews

### Andrew Masullo

DANIEL WEINBERG GALLERY



Andrew Masullo, *AM 159*, 2005–2006, oil on canvas, 12 x 10"

Despite key lime, hot pink, cerulean, stop-sign red, rain-slicker yellow, whether arranged in quasi-modern geometries or lava lamp bubbles, many of Andrew Masullo's strangest and strongest works deploy white as simultaneously positive and negative space. In the dinky *3713*, 2000, two "teeth" bite into part of a red star; the fried egg—white surface of *3156*, 1995–2000, puckered and crunchy, is about the size of a fried egg, sunny-side up, the yolk a variegated posy. A white, curved "cloud," like the soft explosion announcing the arrival of another outré relative on *Bewitched*, envelops most of the tart verdant ground of *4525*, 2005–2006; red squares dot it, and red semicircles crimp its edges. More than a few of the paintings seem dimmed by dust, as if they had been resting in an attic prior to making their debut.

The sharpest critical responses to Masullo's work, while invoking its apparent "carnival mood" or palette at risk of "sugar shock," note, as critic Ken Johnson does, other crucial strains: what might be called recalcitrance with "a retrospective pathos underlying the jaunty surface." Imbued with an idiosyncratic intensity, Masullo's questioning, nonobjective, and/or not easily referential paintings suggest the "personal" as a permissible critical tack. But I am as wary about the utility of this mode as I would be about any strictly formalist analysis, or of one yoking Masullo's project to a lineage of artists from Joseph Cornell, Paul Klee, and Florine Stettheimer to Forrest Bess, John Wesley, and Mary Heilmann.

This tight survey included work made between 1992 and 2007, the selected paintings ranging in size from the petite (displayed in a suite hung salon style) and the small (one group hung in a sequence of nine) to the fairly large. What might be called Masullo's provocations jettison such uninterrogated pieties as stylistic progression and conceptual programmatics—which is not to say that his paintings don't have loads of style or that he isn't thinking through some serious matters (does abstraction work syntactically? Is color its vocabulary or, rather, its framework or foundation? When and how does pattern invoke or become the symbolic?).

All his untidy activity of experimentation continues rather than, as is the case with so many painters, freezing into a stylistic device. Nowhere is Masullo's antipathy and invention more apparent than in his two rainbow-vortex paintings, *2811*, 1992, and the twin star of *3216*, 1996–97: Both drolly, proleptically out-Grotjahn Mark Grotjahn. Masullo's refusal of the safety of such trademarked stasis has its consequences. "This is a vulgar age / Sighed the violet / Why must humans drag us / Into their silly lives / They treat us / As attributes / As symbols / And make us / Fade / Stink," Stettheimer wrote in "The Revolt of the Violet." Masullo takes up the revolt, his work a rebuke, tender violence puzzling painting's status quo.

—Bruce Hainley

# OBSERVER

## A Shaggy Countercultural Icon And His Mannered Disciples

By Mario Naves • 10/07/02 12:00am

Did I read in The New Yorker that the abstract paintings of Andrew Masullo, currently on display at the Washburn Gallery, are “pleasantries”? I detect a dismissive tone. Mr. Masullo’s kitsch-inflected amalgamations of cut-rate biomorphs and askew geometries are cheerful, bright and bouncy; they flirt with frivolity. But watch your back: His art has bite. Acerbic and abrasive, the paintings are sharpened with irony, if not defined by it. I thought those tweedy types at The New Yorker cared about words. Sure, Mr. Masullo’s pictures are “pleasantries”—if your idea of pleasant is sucking on a Jolly Rancher laced with vinegar.

The sweet exterior of Mr. Masullo’s art is a façade for some pointed stylistic recycling. This is an artist who trivializes precedent even as he honors it: Hanna-Barbera and Myron Stout, retro-futurism and utopian longings, crusty textures and drop-dead elegance—they’re all the same to him. Yet Mr. Masullo does love painting. It’s there to see in the tautness of his rhythms, the clean authority of his contours and the tenderness with which his forms bump, clunk and grind. Not that he’s perfect: The gloppy forays into relief painting succumb to a cuteness that is Mr. Masullo’s downfall. There are moments when I worry that he doesn’t have an original bone in his body. But there are other moments—most of the time, in fact—when I think he’s one of the best painters working.

Andrew Masullo: Recent Paintings is at the Washburn Gallery, 20 West 57th Street, until Oct. 19.



# NEW YORK

## **Fall Preview: Art**

### **GALLERIES**

#### **Paintings and Works on Paper**

It's a rare event when Joan T. Washburn Gallery takes on a new artist -- we're speaking, after all, of the 57th Street site that handles the estates of Jackson Pollock, David Smith, Ray Parker, and other icons of abstraction. Then again, few contemporary artists are more perfectly in sync with this gallery's aesthetic than Andrew Masullo, who is opening its fall season with his small abstract paintings, works that comprise all-over geometric fields or interlocking shapes of thick dried pigment. (20 West 57th Street; September 14 to October 21.)

# ARTFORUM

## New York Reviews

**Andrew Masullo**

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

Andrew Masullo doesn't seem to get out much. So slowly and obsessively does he approach the craft of painting that a single canvas might remain in progress for months, even years. For one work, Masullo began by painting hundreds of tiny, glossy, multicolored circles on the canvas. Then, as if he were making a mosaic, he pressed a bit of dried pigment into the center of each one. The results of all that effort are certainly gorgeous to look at.

The mostly small-scale abstract paintings on view in Masullo's recent show were remarkable for their arresting colors—orange, lime green, yellow, fuchsia—and geometric intricacies. (The artist's titles are always given according to their successive number in his oeuvre; those here were roughly in the 3,200–3,340 range.) In 3338, 1997, blue, pink, and yellow rectangles fill the surface of the round canvas while the elaborate pattern of hundreds of small, brightly colored diamonds seen in 3213, 1996–98, is like the view afforded by a giant kaleidoscope. Masullo's patterns evoke '60s and '70s pop culture. Some resemble retro interior design motifs, such as busy linoleum floors and psychedelic fabrics, and one can easily imagine the nine rectangles of 3314, 1998, framing the faces of the Brady Bunch in the opening sequence of the television program. This kitsch streak was visible in his earlier efforts, which included paint-by-numbers portraits of puppies and embellished thrift store paintings. 3299, 1997–98, concentrates on the motif of the colored square, here irregularly sized and scattered across a yellow plane, recalling Jan Arp or Ellsworth Kelly's chance compositions—minus Kelly's relative flatness or purity. Surfaces are mottled, imprecise, and thick, often because Masullo, rather than use a new canvas, works over paintings salvaged from junk shops, so that there might be a preexisting landscape or portrait underneath.

Even without this underlayer, the works would not be devoid of subjects. Coded references can be found in any given juxtaposition of shapes, which sometimes signify individuals. In one work, the artist and his father are represented by a small sunburst pattern next to a larger one. 3328, 1996–98, initially recalled an Yves Klein monochrome relief: A loose white grid divides dusters of small circular lumps of modeling paste (painted red) on a red ground. The piece is actually an homage to Florine Stettheimer, one of Masullo's artistic idols, whose name can be spelled out by counting the number of red bumps in each square of the grid. (The top left square, for example, has six units, to signify F, the sixth letter of the alphabet.)

In many ways, Masullo's entire approach may be considered in terms of increments: the numerical titles and infinitely variable compositions, the manual addition of codelike elements, the gradual buildup of pigment, and the accrual of the many works themselves. The resolute quirkiness of such oblique maneuvers may give cause to dismiss the works as pointlessly arcane or even vaguely adolescent. Yet Masullo's enterprise is far from being merely a deadpan riddle. The sincerity and idiosyncratic lengths to which he goes to impart meaning are precisely what makes these works stand apart from the slickness of painting's current revival.

—[Meghan Dailey](#)

# The New York Times

## ART GUIDE

NOV. 6, 1998

Galleries: Chelsea

ANDREW MASULLO, Derek Eller, 529 West 20th Street, (212) 206-6411 (through Nov. 14). Small, jaunty abstract paintings. The high-key palette and geometric compositions suggest a parody of 1950's and 60's design, but Mr. Masullo's endlessly inventive play with pattern and his manifest affection for the act of painting gives these works sensual presence and idiosyncratic authenticity (Johnson).

# The New York Times

## Art in Review

By HOLLAND COTTER MARCH 15, 1996

Andrew Masullo Andre Emmerich Gallery 41 East 57th Street Manhattan Through  
March 30

This is a very big show (some five dozen works) in a very small space, but it doesn't feel the least overcrowded.

Mr. Masullo's paintings are pint-size: several are on the scale of pocket notebooks; only a few aspire to the breadth of legal pads. All are titled by their sequential number in his oeuvre. (The current batch are in the 3,000's.) And his approach to painting itself is often minutely incremental. A tiny tondo titled "3115," for example, is composed of little rings of raised pigment, each with a dab of color, like a sugar filling, in its center.

Florine Stettheimer is one of this artist's muses (others are Joseph Cornell and Forrest Bess), and her preference for pink and fuchsia and marigold orange matches his own. So does her fixation on ornamental detail. In fact, Mr. Masullo's abstract painting might easily be seen as ornament unmoored from modernist Higher Meaning and left to sail off as a language of its own.

That language can be surprisingly varied. Each of Mr. Masullo's paintings is both loquacious and hermetic in a slightly different way. And although there isn't a single raised voice in the room, the nervous accumulation of dots and zigzags and bulges keeps the whole ensemble slightly on edge. Painting is going in all kinds of directions; Mr. Masullo's "good things in small packages" approach is one of them, and it is persuasively argued here. HOLLAND COTTER

# Los Angeles Times

## La Cienega

February 16, 1990 | SUVAN GEER

Detritus of Culture: Innumerable paintings lumped together with word-puzzle texts and deceased movie-star photos make Andrew Masullo's art as complicated and self-contradictory as life, personal experience and the art world itself. Along with his own simply lettered "message" paintings, Masullo obsessively displays as his art an eclectic collection of scavenged images, framed and hung meticulously on the walls a la Allan McCollum. This detritus of culture is absorbed pretty much wholesale into his process via the addition of a narrow vertical line of patterning or a block of solid color. Then each piece is dutifully signed and numbered like entries in a crudely efficient mental reference book.

This is not work that explains itself. Repeatedly, words and images bounce off one another, breeding a sketchy kind of mental construct that questions as much as it explains. Alongside tributes to Bette Davis and bright pink enshrined photo enlargements of the artist are mirrors obscured by black painted splotches, literary quotes that breathe with *Angst* and fancy framed canvasses that dumbly read "Art." If meaning can be ferreted out of fragmentation by sheer dogged questioning and repositioning, then Masullo has the modern system for information assimilation by the tail. (Asher/Faure, 612 N. Almont Drive, to March 10.)



# ARTFORUM

## New York Reviews

### Andrew Masullo

#### FICTION/NONFICTION

Andrew Masullo combs junk shops, flea markets, garbage heaps, and attics in search of resonant objects and images. In the past, Masullo's compulsive output (his previous New York show included 220 works selected from some 450 produced over the preceding year) ranged from mosaiclike text pieces made up of individually cut-out and assembled letters, to eviscerated books restuffed with cubes of fur and fabric.

The works shown here consist largely of original (primarily abstract) and found paintings on wood or canvas. A taut string of collage-paintings ringing the room includes an old watercolor fashion sketch, a black-and-white baby picture smeared with yellowish paint, and a photograph of a young boy, in which sections have been replaced with fur. Masullo's interventions disfigure and therefore seem to discredit the originals, yet at the same time they somehow manage to salvage these homely artifacts from oblivion. In some cases the artist simply numbers the objects, indicating that they are now part of *his* oeuvre. By barely touching the originals Masullo implies a kind of two-stage creation in which he enhances the existing works and elevates them from unself-conscious productions to Art. In a somewhat clumsy declaration of this strategy, the artist inscribes the word "art" across a naïve portrait.

Masullo's works often refer to his personal and family history. Monochrome backgrounds feature dates of psychological significance, artistic breakthroughs, and the births and deaths of kin. A piece inscribed "Daddy dies at 69. Mother is dead at 67" refers to the artist's recent realization that he no longer has any rapport with Mom and Dad; in another piece, the artist's birth date, September 6, 1957, is presented in tombstone fashion and waits to be completed upon his death. Other works refer to Masullo's creative idols: two paintings supply the dates of Forrest Bess paintings owned by the artist, another the date of Barnett Newman's death, a fourth the name of a silent-film actress who fascinated Joseph Cornell.

As opposed to Masullo's previous New York exhibit which was more diversified, this show focuses, at least intermittently, on Masullo's apparently longstanding identification with the film star Veronica Lake. Masullo at one time pursued a career as an actor and singer, adopting Andrew Lake as a stage name. Masullo's professional headshots and Veronica Lake's publicity photos recur throughout the works, subject to similar alterations. Lake's image is set on various grounds, from red, white, and blue stripes of paint to tin foil; Masullo's portrait is painted over with blue and white squiggles or set against painted backgrounds. Masullo has tended in the past to trade in cryptic codes that mingle shared (if obscure) cultural material with autobiographical details, and the power of his work derives from the intensity of his concentration on such diverse stimuli as Bess paintings and used grammar books. The reason for the artist's fascination with Lake, however, is not elucidated in these recent works, and the camped-up idolization of a past screen star seems more predictable than Masullo's previous efforts.

—[\*Lois E. Nesbitt\*](#)

# The New York Times

## Review/Art

By ROBERTA SMITH  
Published: April 21, 1989

Andrew Masullo Fiction/Nonfiction Gallery 21 Mercer Street Through April 29

As the seemingly countless small works in his fifth solo exhibition prove, Andrew Masullo can make art out of anything: the cover of an old book or its typescript, a found photograph or a junk-shop oil painting, a scrap of plywood or an old powder compact.

Into the bottom of the powder case, he may collage a phrase from the libretto of Alban Berg's opera "Lulu" or part of a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, each word cut from the pages of an old book. He may add a staff of horizontal lines or a tiny tight white spiral to the found paintings. To the found wood, he may append a tenderly wrought geometric motif; to a photograph, a seemingly random phrase like "The last day of 1988" or "Are you my mother?" Sometimes the connection is more direct: on a press photograph of Adlai Stevenson, the artist writes, "JUL. '65," the month and year of Stevenson's death.

Mr. Masullo's exhibition is as mesmerizing as it is disturbing. Visually indebted to the work of Joseph Cornell, he is an artist obsessed with big themes - life, death, love, sex and emotional suffering - with small scale and the delicate detritus of human existence. He's also an obsessive marker of time. Like the artist Jonathan Borofsky, he gives each work an inventory number (he's now in the 1,900's) and many of them simply count from 1 to 10, using painted numerals or collaged words.

Repetition compulsions aside, Mr. Masullo has a kind of perfect pitch where the rhythms and meanings of other people's writings are concerned. The quotes he selects from Berg and St. Vincent Millay, as well as Thomas Wolf, are heart-rending and well matched to the personal nature of his art. But Mr. Masullo's obsessions and revelations can also take over, resulting in an insular self-absorbed quality that verges on the ludicrous and the naive. (Consider, for example, several small bottles containing body fluids.) In addition, the way these exquisite recycled surfaces tend to exist out of time - looking as if they could have been made at any point over the last 50 years - is problematic.

Genuinely touching as this work is upon first encounter - and when viewed in bulk - too many of Mr. Masullo's objects degenerate to the level of a souvenir or psychological symptom when considered individually.