

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

BY KIM LEVIN

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BONNIE COLLURA

Lehmann Maupin

39 Greene Street

Through May 26

PIETER SCHOOLWERTH

American Fine Arts

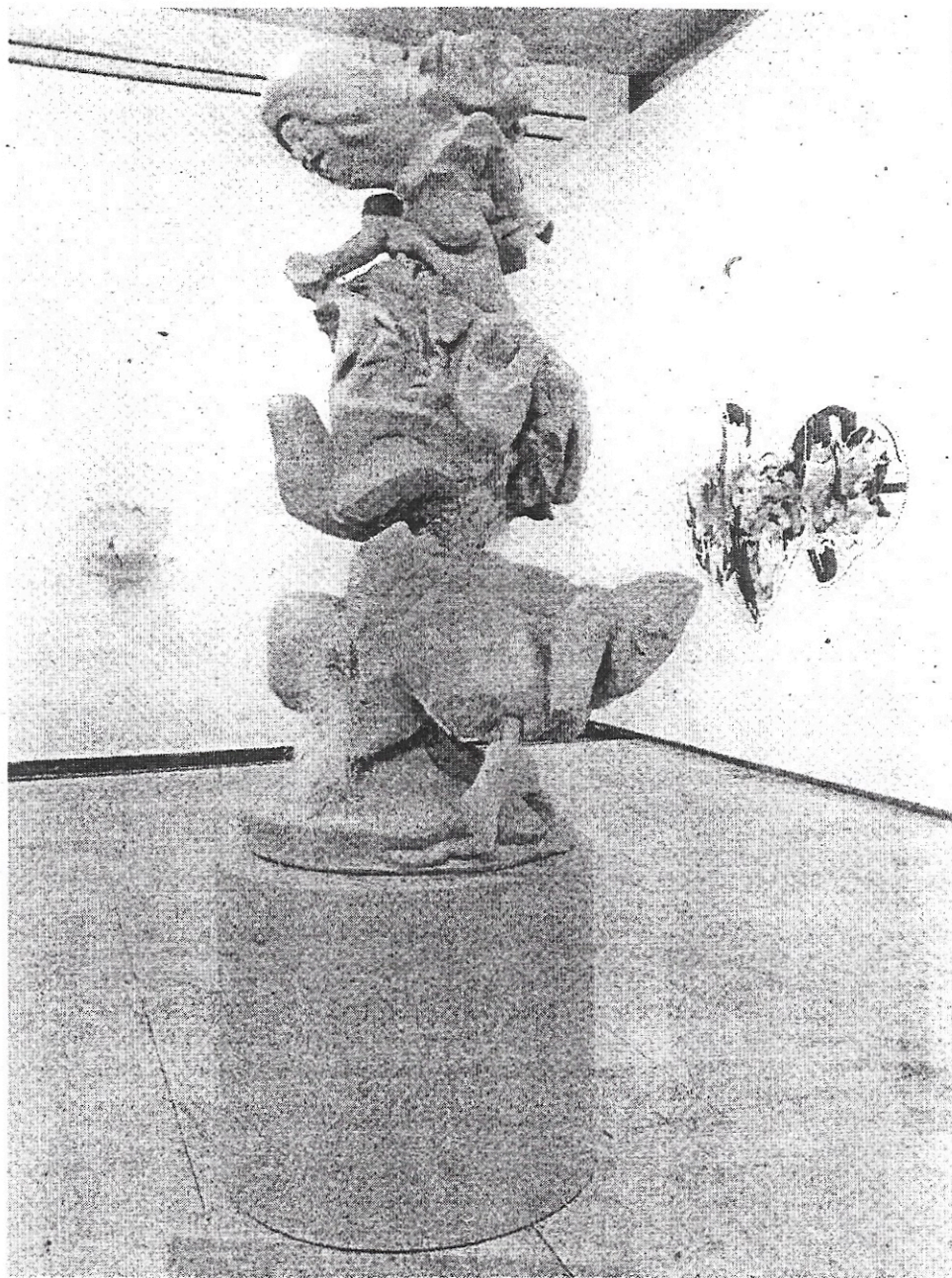
22 Wooster Street

Through May 17

Something odd is going on. In one Soho gallery, Bonnie Collura's lumpy sculptures and fragmented works on paper look for all the world like the final meltdown of neo-baroque figuration into an abstract state of molten fusion. In another gallery nearby, Pieter Schoolwerth's psyched-out Pop-gothic-hipster paintings do the opposite: Their mannered choreography of people, pets, headphone cords, olives, and other pseudorealistic minutiae seems spooked by an invisible process of fission—as if the artist, attempting to split the atoms of abstraction, had released a slick new representational energy.

Collura's show, called "In the Gutter," purports to explore the in-between spaces where the figurative imagery of pop culture, mythology, and folklore mingles and morphs into mock-abstract form. Her opaque monochrome sculptures, which look as pliable as Silly Putty, are amorphous masses of barely recognizable legs, bellies, hooves, branches, entrails, classical drapery, and unicorn horns that refer to truncated old narratives of transformation and mutability. Unless you're forewarned, however, you might not notice the specific allusions to Daphne mutating into a tree or Snow White into a doe in these buoyant gray, pink, or beige masses. More obvious to the naked eye are the formal remnants of Bernini and Disney, which fuse in an unlikely amalgam, along with their respective obsessions: ecstatic abandon and totalizing control.

Collura's own private narrative is even more oblique. In her drawings, blue dots stand in for a "guardian" character; red dots warn of an "abductor"; yellow ones signify Saint Ludovica and "martyr." But unless you read the artist's statement, which presents a bewildering cast of these symbolic characters, you might never guess. Her work makes no effort to reveal its secrets or to ingratiate itself.



BERNINI MEETS DISNEY IN-SILLY PUTTY: COLLURA'S SCULPTURE *TOTEM* (2000, DETAIL) AT LEHMANN MAUPIN.

Even more difficult to like and no easier to decipher, Schoolwerth's suite of paintings, titled "The Black Rainbow Domino's Effect on the Infinite Burgundy Line," tries too hard. The histrionic gestures, stagy settings, outlandish details, garish color, contrived compositions, and retro stylistic tics—hinting at invisible abstract connections and formal devices—repel as well as intrigue. Yet the hyperactive figurative imagery isn't quite as gratuitous as it looks: Schoolwerth bases his work on an abstract system of numbers and colors that generates the narrative, the symbols, and the spurious realism. Recalling Balthus's stilted choreography and Dalí's bewilderments, these paintings imply that something unsavory is going on behind the scenes. Don't ask what. It has to do with an imaginary No. 8 subway line, a fast-food chain, the interconnectivity of everything, and beer. "The idea was to burst out of this logic system into total intoxication," explained the artist in a recent interview.

So what do these two artists have in common? Nothing. And everything. Going by appearances, Collura's quasiabstract sculpture and Schoolwerth's pseudorealistic painting are worlds apart. One abstracts sculptural volume and form from an invented narrative system of figurative characters. The other conjures up narrative imagery from a system of invisible abstractions. They share a denatured sensibility and a debased virtuosity, along with a highly artificial and elaborately abstruse generative method. In terms of process, a phantasmic constructed system generates the art. You'd need a decoder to decipher the chain reactions and symbolic causes and effects that propel these secret narratives, and neither artist provides it.

Collura and Schoolwerth belong to a growing breed of paraconceptualist contrarians. Like a number of other artists lately, they predicate their artistic output on improbable, impenetrable, and private systems of symbolic connectivities. Ronald Jones, who for years has spun conspiracy theories around groupings of otherwise ordinary objects, may be the most venerable and notorious practitioner. Matt Mullican, elaborating on his own system of signs, may be the most methodical, and Matthew Ritchie, with his cubistic galaxies of invisible beings, the most mystical. Matthew Barney is the most lionized.

Conceptualism, which once upon a time was a severe and systemic end-game strategy, has mutated in the hands and minds of these and other artists into a whole array of personalized, capricious game plans. This phenomenon may have something to do with lessons absorbed over the past couple of decades from trendy French theorists, including notions of distancing, simulacra, and degrees of separation from an equally fictitious original. It may have to

do with spectacle and theatricality. Or it could simply be a substitute for inspiration, which has long been out of season.

With their generative nature, these personalized systems resonate with the interlocking networks of cyberspace, the unraveling mysteries of genetic coding, and other new structures that are rapidly altering our world. It's too soon to say whether complex mental constructs are merely a means of rationalizing the ongoing production of painting and sculpture in an art-world center that has slipped its orbit, or whether—on a planet in which everything is increasingly interconnected by chance or design, genome or dotcom—artists have a new urge to create universes. ■