Anton Würth at C.G. Boerner

One of the cleverest, most stirring shows I’ve seen recently was also the most arcane. Mounted at C.G. Boerner, known mainly for old master prints—though the gallery has occasionally, if only recently, ventured into showing contemporary material—was a project one year in the making, in which the Berlin-based German engraver and book artist Anton Würth fashioned a "dialogue" with the 17th-century French artist Robert Nanteuil, engraver to king and court. On view were a dozen or so prints by Nanteuil, portraits all, depicting various important personages in oval frames adorned with laurel, ribbons and inscriptions, and surrounded by additional honorific trappings. Würth responded to Nanteuil with two suites of his own engravings, one set of four and another of eight. The four are smaller and vertical (ca. 14 by 9 1/4 inches) and were intended as experiments that Würth decided in the end to edition (in 10). The eight are larger and horizontal (ca. 14 by 19 1/2 inches), in an edition of 12. All are abstract, consisting of a blank oval within a shield-shaped medallion executed in spare outlines, set into grounds of parallel horizontal lines interspersed with schematic bows, hearts, flowers, arabesques or fleurs-de-lis.

Engraving is purely linear; passages of light and dark result from varying densities of cross-hatching or parallels carved directly into the copperplate. In the case of Nanteuil, the lines are mostly parallel; and remarkable indeed, given this limitation, is the enormous range of shading and texture he mastered, particularly in hair and skin. Würth, however, was uninterested in creating direct correspondences. His prints are highly conceptual "portraits" of Nanteuil's very pursuit; at their center is merely an absence marked by the vacant ovals, a clue, as it were, to the idealized nature of the project.

Despite his rarefied concept, however, Würth's prints have a delicate and quirky physicality. His decorative vignettes, the result of adding a few more parallel lines in key spots, materialize as a kind of buzz in the screenlike ground. In turn, the shapes allude to the decorative details and emblems in the Baroque prints, which are key to their function of indicating the power and prestige of the sitters. It is a spirited give-and-take in both form and content, a welcome alternative to the more heavy-handed historicism often found in contemporary art.

Würth's bookmaking experience was apparent in an elegant dual-language (German and English) catalogue he prepared for the show, as meticulously conceived in its texts as in its format, designed in abutting columns of roman and italic typography. The texts include maxims on engraving by Nanteuil, translated by Würth, along with Würth's own theoretically tinged meditations on their shared métier.

Würth honed Nanteuil's formula to its essence, and the resulting images are both minimal and laden with an intellectual and perceptual complexity that side-swipes their apparent naiveté. Yet they remain light and humorous. They also exploit the quality of breathing on the page that is the particular property of the beautifully engraved line. Though abstract, they sat on the wall as veritable beings, no less fully embodied in their own right than those of Nanteuil.

―Karen Wilkin

Carlo Maria Mariani at Francis M. Naumann

Roman-born, New York-based painter Carlo Maria Mariani is widely recognized as a key figure in Italy's avant-garde of the 1970s and '80s. He is best known today for a conflation of classical technique and quotations from iconic works of 20th-century art. This recent exhibition, focused on mostly small-scale works on paper, spanned two decades (from 1987 to 2007) and provided a succinct overview of Mariani's project while highlighting his ongoing correspondence with Duchamp, especially with works by Duchamp. The earliest piece on view, Classical Head (1987), drawn on light-tan paper, suggests an image of an ancient Roman bust; the latest, Refuge (Tires), 2007, features similar Classical heads, but they are shown poking out here and there from a heap of discarded auto-mobile tires like that of Allan Kaprow's 1961 neo-Dada installation Yard. Mariani, in this drawing, makes it clear that he has more than a little humor in his sensibility.

Possessed of history and, simultaneously, unafraid of the present, Mariani offers substantial consolation to those who regret the loss of expert craftsmanship in art. He demonstrates here an extraordinary dexterity with drawing and collage, which has stayed sure over the course of time represented by the show. For example, in Study for "Comp 2" (1989), a kneeling female nude is seen from behind. She wears a blue Janus mask on the back of her head, and on the ground next to her is Duchamp's Fountain, complete with its date of execution (1917) and R. Mutt signature. Also at her feet is a bunch of bananas, a reference to a painting by de Chirico. Head Rack (1990), another pencil drawing with an overt reference to Duchamp, carefully portrays Bottle Rack, the famous 1914 readymade, in outline. From the upper hooks hang five finely modeled Classical heads, and from the rack's lowest level hangs a skull wearing a poet's crown of laurel. Tied to the skull is a hand holding a brush. Here, the vying symbols for painting and poetry make the piece an ironic memento mori.

Study for the City (2001) celebrates the innate, somewhat static beauty of a Classical head, albeit placed in a modern urban setting. In the distance are two high-rise buildings against a dark blue, nearly purple sky.
that is somewhat threatening. But these are not contemporary structures. Their omiate silhouettes suggest the distant past and reinforce the sense of timeless idealism that permeates nearly all the works in the show, even those that encompass the most morbid Dada images.

—Jonathan Goodman

William Carroll
at Elizabeth Harris

William Carroll, who recently earned an MFA at Queens College, is the former director of this gallery and had worked as an arts administrator for many years prior to that. His first solo exhibition here included over three dozen very small grisailles in acrylic on watercolor paper plus two very large colored paintings on paper (all works 2006-07). They all depict New York City's skyscrapers, apartment buildings, churches and factories in silhouette, and are based on notations Carroll made while strolling the city's streets.

The two large paintings on paper are somewhat reminiscent of the emblematic architectural images found in the early paintings of Donald Sultan and Robert Moskowitz, though without their heaviness. Carroll's utilization of glued-together sections of paper lends his smokestacked industrial site (Building 3, 96 by 129 inches), rendered in pink against a baby blue ground, and vintage downtown skyscraper (Building 2, 96 by 63 inches), in yellow on a pink ground, a delicacy similar to that of a paper kimono.

In the small works, Carroll consistently makes the nearer forms blacker and enhances the illusion of distance by lightening the shapes of the background structures. Each shape contains a slightly puddled area of aqueous acrylic, indicating that the paint was applied very wet and allowed to dry in the manner of watercolor or ink, mediums one could easily mistake for the plastic paint. The pictures seem to owe something to the simplified draftsmanship of comic strips. This association adds to the sense that the images are the product of deep memory, stretching back, perhaps, to childhood, as much as of a contemporary metropolitan experience. There is also a kind of mute spookiness—the buildings have nary a window—and, alternatively, a quizzical liveliness about them.

At 7⅜ by 5⅞ inches (a typical size), NYC 248 features a black vertical at the left side of the upright sheet that seems to represent the side of a building viewed up close. On the right edge is a medium-gray shape with a diagonal slant at its top that suggests the mansard style used for some skyscraper roofs. The form has a blocklike foot, indicating that much of the facade is in setback. Toward the composition's center is a lighter gray rectangle. A still lighter one fills the remaining space; behind it, one final rectangle, slim as a pinky, pokes up into the pearly gray of the sky. Like the other charming, smart works here, it offers a deft combination of blunt humor and silent depth: Nancy and Sluggo meet Giorgio Morandi.

—Joe Fyfe

Cheryl Donegan
at Oliver Kamm/5BE

In a published artist's statement, Cheryl Donegan compared Robert Bresson's film A Man Escaped, which concerns a plan for fleeing prison, to the problem of the artist in the studio. This glimmeringly brilliant artist has been interrogating painting (and, by extension, the studio environment) through the use of performance, video, drawing and painting itself since the beginning of her career, 15 or so years ago.

This exhibition featured small paintings (all between 20 by 16 inches and 24 by 18 inches) made from several layers of laminated archival cardboard, gessoed white. Using brushed water-based oil paint, Donegan partially covered them with feathery renderings of semi-abstracted imagery taken from Internet merchandise sites and from eBay.

Lone figurative silhouettes make up several black-and-white panels, while the polymorphic panels display cubistic shards of lilac, gray, forest green, Day-Glo pink and pale yellow, among other colors. Many have bare areas where spare pencil lines expose the imagery beneath.

The paintings were hung in groups or singly, and large intervals of the gallery's walls were left bare. Though there was nary a video monitor in sight, the room had a very mild flicker due to the many fluorescent lights installed at Donegan's request. They lift the gallery space evenly and fully, emphasizing the installation and the room as much as the individual works.

The show's longish press release consisted of a series of epigrams by the poet and psychotherapist Kim Rosenfield. Grouped under headings such as "To Remove Scorches" and "Prada," the short passages appeared to have been taken either from a home shopping channel or a not-too-recent homemakers' instruction manual. These texts seem to reframe the idea that in both studio and household, women and artists take their place among electronic images of consumer products: Donegan's paintings are Petri dishes set in the studio/home to trap the incursions of consumerist culture.

The conflation of the studio and the domestic space has been an issue in Donegan's work as far back as 1997, when laundry baskets were included in a video that scrutinized quotidian artistic practice. Though Donegan's approach may appear too oblique for some, I thought of Clive James's comment that "the creative imagination can prove that it exists by merely suggesting itself."

—Joe Fyfe

Richard Hambleton
at Woodward

Canadian-born painter Richard Hambleton made a splash, quite literally, in New York in the early 1980s with his black-splattered graffiti images on buildings throughout the Lower East Side. These "shadow" paintings, clandestinely executed with expressionist flourishes of speedy brushwork, depicted highly stylized, life-size figures and animals. They enlivened the grim, derelict structures that once dominated the area.

Hambleton was a fixture on the East Village gallery scene, but after the mid-'80s, he disappeared for a time. He retreated to his studio to develop over the years a distinctive form of gestural abstraction inspired by nature rather than by the urban environment. The 18 refined, brooding landscapes featured in this recent exhibition, titled "The Beautiful Paintings," his first solo in over 20 years, convey a rather Romantic sensibility and, indeed, deliver what the show's title promised.

Harking back to his salad days, Hambleton began the exhibition with a "shadowman" on the first wall that visitors encountered.