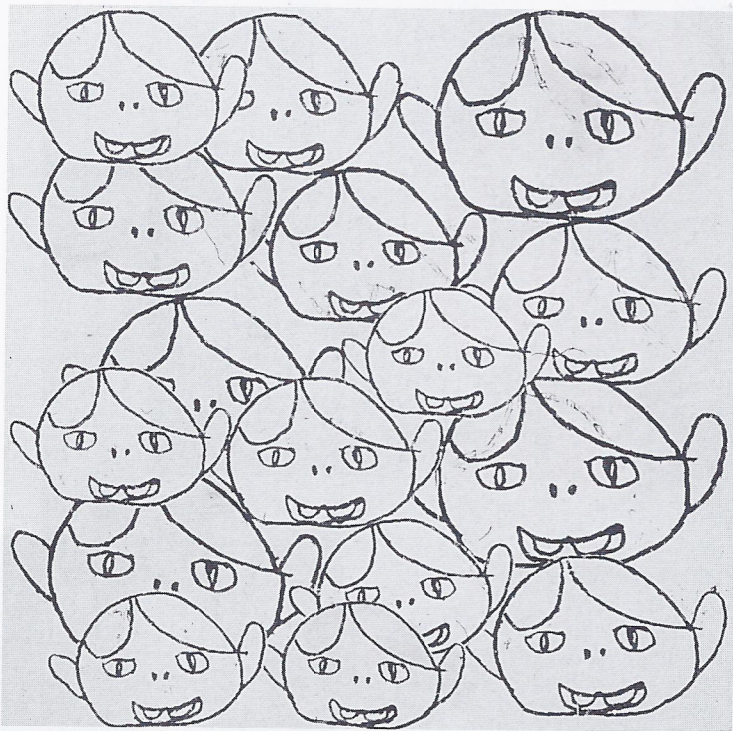


## New York Exhibitions

# Drawing the Line

by April Kingsley



Donald Baechler, *Small Crowd Painting #16*, 1997-99, acrylic and fabric collage on canvas, 96 x 96".

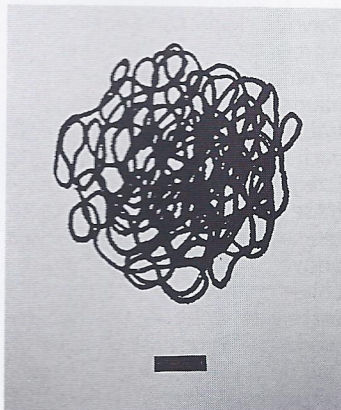
Last year, late in the game, I came to appreciate the real aesthetic value of a cartoony imagistic style I had pretty much discounted before then because of its association with Pop Art. This style derived from the funnies, early animated films, and post-war advertising illustration. "The kind of drawing that was going on in the '40s and '50s doesn't really happen any more," according to John Clem Clarke, the artist who sparked my new interest. He attributed it to "a

few hundred people who kind of invented a style of very clear drawing and presentation, first of all, to sell products." Clarke sees this style as "quite uniquely American." Curves, concision, boldness, clarity, and bounce characterize work in this style. Clarke's line reverberates with the liveliness of the animations he enjoyed as a child, and has the effortless look he so admires in the old ads. Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein responded to the extreme

condensation of an image into a few salient lines, as do many of the artists who have picked up from where they left off. I found plenty of evidence on the current gallery scene that this half-century-old linear style lives on, still wiry and vigorous, in superb health.

### Elizabeth Murray at Pace

Its manifestations are diverse. At Pace Gallery, Elizabeth Murray shows it at its most explosively energetic, full of springing curves and crackling linear fire. This cartoon biomorphism, glowing hues, and the neo-Cubist spatial complexity she relishes have become her hallmarks. Her referential abstractions continue the themes of domesticity that have occupied her since the early '80s—peopled interiors and bowl cups. Two paintings, *Perfectly Morning* and *Open Drawer*, revert to the rectangular with particularly powerful results, while the rest of the shaped and multipartite canvases continue familiar structures, whether overlapped or abutted. The impact



Micah Lexier, *A Minute of My Time* (December 11, 1995, 01:07-01:08), 1995, acid-etched stainless steel, metal plaque, pins, 15 x 15".



and poignancy of a painting such as *Petals Falling Apart* results from the conjunction of the poetic title with the jagged zigzag edges (which are cartoon code for breakage) and the hot pink color. The total is more than the sum of its parts, mainly because the paint handling is so deft.

With *Riverbank* and *Maybe True*, Murray seems to be sounding a new tone, a darker, stranger tone than we've heard before. The modeled, biological looking forms with their sickly iridescence begin to seem closer to those of Carroll Dunham and Peter Saul than those of Joan Miró or Juan Gris, as her paintings did in the past. The work of all three artists, Murray, Dunham and Saul, while having its humorous, even antic side, functions on a high level of seriousness. Murray's is literary and personal, Dunham's psychological, and Saul's political.

**Carroll Dunham, Paul Noble, Daniel Oates, and Peter Saul at Gorney, Bravin, and Lee**

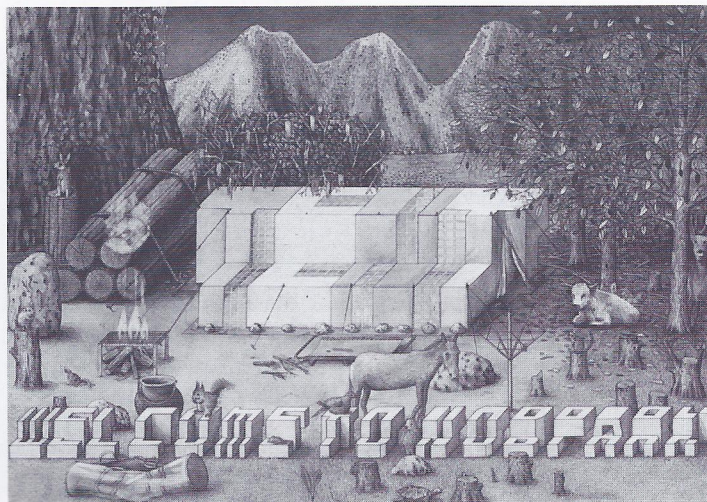
Both Dunham and Saul are included with Paul Noble and Daniel Oates in a fascinating and coherent, though untitled, show at Gorney, Bravin, and Lee in Chelsea. Carroll Dunham showed one of his 1991-92 *Mound Series* paintings, *Down (Mound E)*, in which humanoid forms melt into earth (mound) and water (wave) to create the kind of sentient, all-inclusive creature Klaus Kertess once termed "an organic convulsion of forming" (*Artforum*, May 1994, p. 66). Sprouting from its perimeter are pods, follicles, and tubers, genitals and potential body parts the like of which can also be found all over Paul Noble's

5 by 14 foot drawing, *Nobwaste*—if you look closely enough. Marginalia madness in the hands of this obsessive pencil-wielder generates an entire metaworld within the larger world of Nob (Noble's imaginary civilization) and its waste disposal system. Here thing-like creatures and creature-like things grow from, interact in, and run along its tubes and channels, roads and runnels. These tiny things, invisible from a few feet away, function as scale elements that make the world of Nob seem vast.

Daniel Oates also manipulates scale for effect. *Sunday's Archer Practice*, 1999, is painted directly (and perfectly) on the wall in glowing acrylics. It gives a fish-eye/bird's-eye view of the world that makes it look so round from one end of the lawn, where the archer stands, to the other, where the target is, that hitting the target would be impossible. The acidulous green lawn bellies out so convincingly it seems three-dimensional, not surprising given Oates' past life as a sculptor. He

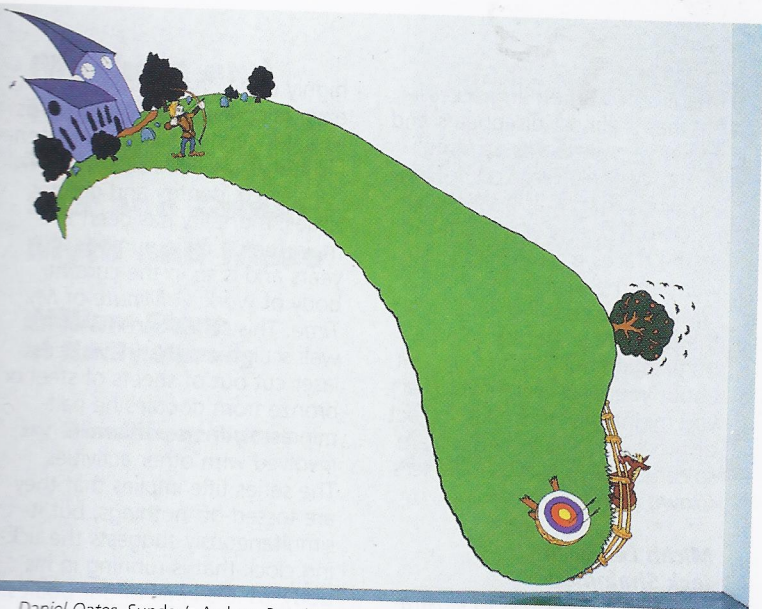
established his reputation with finely crafted wood and plaster figures (or clothing surrogates) of *Happy Workers*. The cartoon people ranged in size from a few inches to knee-high while their uniforms, boots, and lunchboxes were huge. They were labeled "politically dexterous" by critic Terry R. Myers (*La Piz*, February 1993, p. 71) because they looked too cute and content with their lowly lot to be believable. Oates hid their potential for going postal, as current parlance puts it, behind their grinning faces.

Peter Saul presents the viewer with a world in which everyone seems to have gone postal in violent reaction to some terrible political event or practice. His horrific exaggerations and distortions of the subject of *Woman II* are simultaneously frightening and hilarious. He makes Willem de Kooning's treatment of women (to which he is obviously referring in the title) seem sympathetic. Saul's frequent inclusion of Donald Duck in his paintings belabors the fact that his draw-



Paul Noble, *Nobpark (Big Tent)*, 1998, pencil on paper, 19-1/2 x 27-1/2".





Daniel Oates, *Sunday's Archery Practice*, 1999, acrylic on wall, dimensions variable.



Elizabeth Murray, *Open Drawer*, 1998, oil on canvas on wood, 9'4" x 9'. Photograph by Ellen Page Wilson, courtesy PaceWildenstein.

ing and colorism derive from cartoons. Perhaps he does so to hide the probable importance to him of myriad other artists throughout history, from Bosch, Hokusai, and Daumier through the Cubists, German Neorealists, and the Surrealists to de Kooning himself. Saul, in turn, has had an enormous influence on Chicago and West Coast art, on 1980s and 1990s Pop Surrealism, and even on the comics. The story goes that in the 1960s his work influenced S. Clay Wilson, who became one of the creators of *Zap Comics*. *Zap*, in turn had a big influence on Philip Guston's lumpen cartoon style of the 1970s.

**Donald Baechler  
at Cheim & Read**

Donald Baechler was undoubtedly one of the many young art students in the late '70s for whom Guston's kinky and iconoclastic return to the figure had great significance. Certainly Guston's bulbous heads and thick, wavering line echo through Baechler's crowds of disembodied heads today. This, despite the fact that Baechler derives his images from a multiple of sources—cartoons and lino-cut ads such as those in the yellow pages; signage; toilet walls; and drawings by teenagers, schizophrenics, drunks in bars—anyone uneducated about art except children. He makes a final image by combining aspects of these drawings and then projects it onto a canvas already covered with layers of glued-down scraps and sheets of paper and cloth, even clothing. The pattern of this base may still be visible in the final painting, although he usually buries it under additional layers of painted out imagery and drips as he works. The resulting





Donald Baechler, *Small Crowd Painting #3*, 1999, acrylic and fabric collage on canvas, 60 x 60".

surfaces are rich with incident.

A poignant humanism comes through all the faces but those that are commercially based. One can almost sense the tension of someone trying to get that nose right, capture that smile, keep the line from wobbling, or deal with flyaway ears. If Baechler did the original drawings himself, that tension would be gone. Enough of the character of the anonymous sketcher is encoded in the lines to emerge through Baechler's brush. That's the conceptual basis of his endeavor. Here, as in some of Sol LeWitt's work—LeWitt finds his own wall drawings far less interesting than the ones others execute according to his instructions—the "other" inevitably imprints something of his or her personality on the work, and in the process brings it to life.

Using found imagery, frequently arranged in a rough grid as are these crowds of heads, restricting color to only black and white, and painting in series are other pop conceptual aspects of Baechler's work, which he describes as "anecdotal formalism"—a concept that goes back to Jasper Johns. Pick a subject

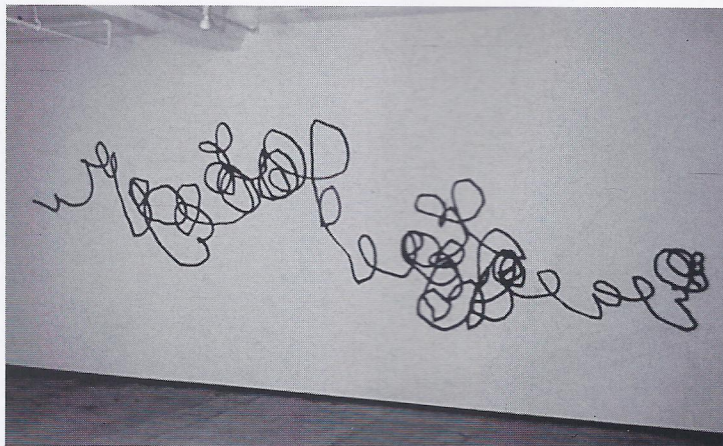
that is so common and accessible that it almost disappears and you have painting as painting without people realizing it. Find a process that is, at least partly, mechanized, and you can leave all the traces of your hand you want on the painting without having to be deadly serious about the result or responsible for it. It's painting about painting, not about you. The problem is that you might get stuck in a subject or process when the results are so consistently good, as Baechler's *Crowd* paintings are.

**Micah Lexier at Jack Shainman**

Donald Baechler's ties to illustration loosen by the year, and so do those of Micah Lexier, but you still pick up on them in Lexier's linear style. A conceptual sculptor, Lexier translates his ideas into solid steel, giving them a literal weight that lends them profundity. He came to conceptualism honestly by studying at the Nova Scotia College of Art. However, he has personalized it over the 15 years since his graduation, turning it into a

highly emotional vehicle for expressing his very real concerns as a gay man in today's threatening times. While his earlier work concerned identity and gender issues, mortality has been the main theme for a number of years and is so in the current body of work, *A Minute of My Time*. This series consists of flat wall sculptures that have been laser cut out of sheets of steel or bronze from doodles he half-mindlessly tosses off while involved with other activities. The series title implies that they are tossed-off nothings, but it simultaneously suggests the ticking clock that is running in his body, as it is in all of our bodies. But looking at his bouncy, curving doodles spread out on the walls of the gallery like giant happy graffiti, death is the last thing on your mind. The lines these "drawings" inscribe are as ebulliently loopy as Elizabeth Murray's. Perhaps the artist means to impart to us the necessity for joy in the face of mortality's inevitable, but probably not imminent, reality.

April Kingsley



Micah Lexier, *A Minute of My Time* (August 30, 1998 12:40–12:41), 1998, waterjet-cut stainless steel, 67 x 45".