



View of Siah Armajani's exhibition, showing (foreground) *Emerson's Parlor*, 2006, and (background) *Edgar Allan Poe's Study*, 2007-08; at Max Protetch.

paintings (all 2008 or '09) recall a time when abstract meant abstracted from something (the figure, for example, streamlined, distorted or abbreviated), as opposed to "non-objective." In Moyer's paintings the focus is indeed on figures, jazzy and stylized, arranged in group tableaux or singly, like portraits.

*Mythic Being* readily demonstrates Moyer's methodology, which can be puzzling, especially in the larger works (this one is 50 by 30 inches), where she over- and under-paints, often changing the curvilinear outlines of primary shapes, which are painted out with thicker, more opaque color, and altering their interior workings. The "mythic being" of the title is a standing heraldic figure with a transparent brown-to-violet cloud partially obscuring its large head, culminating in a pointed spike. The surrounding dark color is tonally uninflected, causing the figure, painted white with overlays of brightly tinted acrylic medium puddles, to pop.

Dark or neutral grounds or surrounds are present in all the paintings, and sometimes resemble period interior colors: a café au lait, easy on the lait, for example, or dusty violet. The use of white, or near white, overlaid with bright gels is also effective. The figures in the smaller portraitlike paintings, such as *Tiny Dancer* (2009), seem to be composed of disparate parts and change character from top to bottom, something like the Surrealists' exquisite corpses. Often, a red line, painted to resemble a string, crosses and loosely joins elements. In *Frieze*, the red "string" links, from neck to neck, pointy-headed paper-doll-like figures arranged in a kind of chorus line. Oddly,

this line is reminiscent of similar devices in paintings by Ben Shahn, and the social realists are also recalled in some of the postures elsewhere. Touches of trompe l'oeil dimensionality and a quirky humor complete the mix.

In spite of their art-historical references and stylization, the paintings have at once an experimental feeling and a cohesive finish, reflecting the hand of an intelligent and literate practitioner. The look and method are welcome relief from the prevailing nonchalance and deliberate slacker stance in so much contemporary painting. Moyer's work is yet another rebirth of cool.

—Stephen Mueller

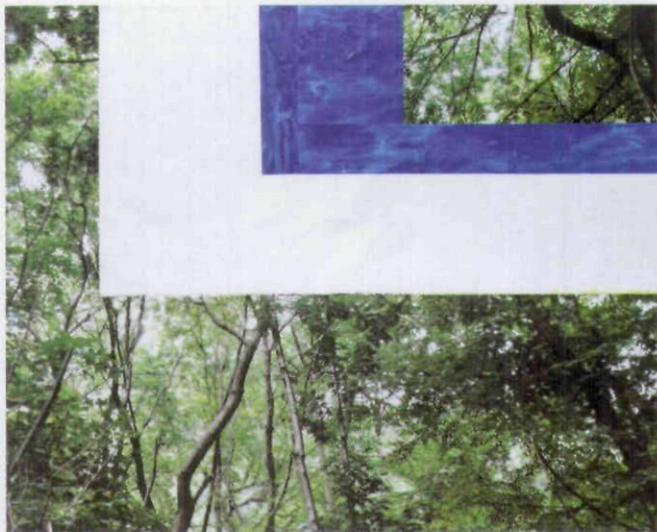
## SIAH ARMAJANI MAX PROTETCH

Throughout his career, Siah Armajani has affirmed that civic assembly is a primary tool of democracy. His mainstays are the furniture of public congregation—seating, lighting, tables, platforms, lecterns—and bridges, meant as both functional and metaphorical structures. Examples of all have been realized at full scale for public spaces; he has also consistently made more intimate three-dimensional work and drawings. Most are inscribed with literary fragments. Spatially, conceptually and iconographically complex and wide-ranging in its references, Armajani's work would never be mistaken for political cheerleading, but it has always supported social engagement. So it was something of a shock, and deeply moving, to see him turning inward in his majestic recent work.

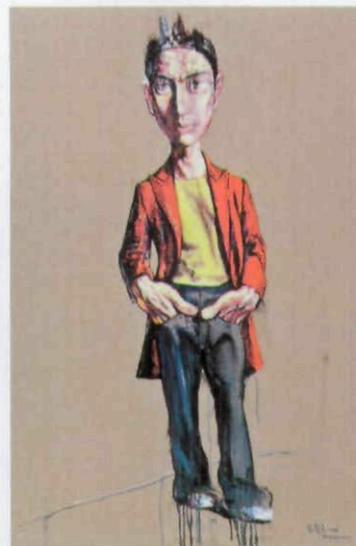
Scaled to suit its name, and glass-

walled like the two other structures shown, *One Car Garage* (2004-08) contains rudimentary domestic appointments: a plain curtain, a solitary chair with a loop of orange electrical cord dangling above it, a narrow staircase with glass treads. Ducts in several sizes span the ceiling. Shelves lining the walls display a variety of toy trucks and an odd assortment of toy-size building models: a gas station, grain elevators and farmhouses. It is tidy but airless. In *Emerson's Parlor* (2006), a complicated T-shaped structure, the sense of loneliness is even more acute. Furnishings include an upended table and a sleeping loft with a bare mattress; a cane hangs from a peg. A scarecrow made of a man's overcoat and fedora, stalks of wheat extending from the coat's arms, occupies one chamber. In another, a coffin-shaped wooden box sits atop a long table. A quote that Armajani has used many times before, which begins "Beauty must come back to the useful arts, and the distinction between the fine and the useful arts be forgotten," is here sequestered in a closet-size anteroom, where it is stenciled on the back wall. Not surprisingly, *Edgar Allan Poe's Study* (2007-08) is the darkest of the three structures. The risers on the stairs leading to its shallow porch are made of massive curved sawblades. A bridge table is laid with a game of solitaire.

A resident of Minneapolis for more than 40 years, Armajani was born in Iran (then Persia) in 1939, and the compositional logic of Persian painting is recalled in his precise, richly detailed drawings,



Zeng Fanzhi: *Portrait 08-12-6*, 2008, oil on canvas, 59½ by 41½ inches; at Acquavella.



James Hyde: *Clearing*, 2009, acrylic on digital print on linen, 68 by 86½ inches; at Southfirst: Art.

four of which were included in this show. Full of tumbling bridges, falling furniture and a great deal of linear pattern, they have the density and intricacy also achieved in the exhibition as a whole. Fitted into the gallery space like pieces in a puzzle, the three big structures created a crystalline but bewildering maze. In a statement written for the exhibition, Armajani cites uncharacteristic sources: Giacometti's *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, and, from Brecht, "Enter the city in the morning with your coat buttoned up / Look for a room, and when your friends knock: / Do not, oh do not, open the door / But / Cover your tracks."

—Nancy Princenthal

## JAMES HYDE SOUTHFIRST: ART

The investigation of painting's fundamentals has lately led James Hyde to use photographs as supports. In "Unbuilt," the New York-based, mid-career artist unveiled 22 such works made over the last four years, pictorial mongrels in which the ostensibly evidentiary nature of the photograph is crossbred with the speculative spirit of abstraction. The flat-footed snapshots, digitally printed in a wide range of sizes, show construction sites, foliage, clouds and water. Deployed across them are areas of acrylic paint, or their proxies—painted blocks of wood, bits of paper, chunks of Styrofoam, swaths of silver tape—that do not fully inhabit the space of the photos but infiltrate and infect it. This is not the fractured and reconstituted picture plane of Cubist-derived collage, but a dreamlike space

containing gently surreal incongruities.

A coat of paint with the nasty texture of an old wall—a squat, blue-and-white L shape—invades a shot of a leafy forest canopy in *Clearing* (68 by 86½ inches, 2009). Like two other, even larger works, it is mounted on linen and stretchers. A grand and confounding image, it grafts the visual vocabulary of reductivist abstraction to a token of the Romantic landscape. In a nod to the historical link between gestural painting and organic form, the artist's touch is looser in *Plot* (21 by 27 inches, 2006), in which he deposits a pool of brushstrokes on a close-up of saw-toothed weeds.

As its title suggests, the ramifications of *Written* (28 by 43 inches, 2008) are in part textual. On the blank slate of an overcast sky, white bands of paint meander like a labyrinth: skywriting's dissipating vapor trails? *Wave* (32 by 43 inches, 2009) is quizzical and magnificent. Inset flush left into a churning photo of a torrent of water is a smaller rectangle of saturated orange paint. It conceals just enough of the picture to render the rest nearly illegible, ironically bringing out its "painterliness." A couple of hot flecks of paint spot the photo's surface. Buzzing between the foamy blue above and the green below, the dizzy, vivid orange is chromatically integrated but, against the blandly smooth inkjet print, alien in its tactility.

Hyde declines any easy resolution of painting and photography, using one like a crowbar to pry open the other. Albeit inadequately, a photo substantiates otherwise ephemeral appearances of the

past. Yet the mark of the hand refutes the clock, tying the image to the present. These hybrids bring digital documentation and haptic immediacy into exquisite equipoise, an intimate standoff of the elegiac and the celebratory. Photos are ghosts, as Hyde contends, but his material interventions call them back from the dead.

—Stephen Maine

## ZENG FANZHI ACQUAVELLA

In his first solo show in New York, Chinese painter Zeng Fanzhi (b. 1964) showed over two dozen works dating from 2007 to the present, a period punctuated by the historic sale of his *Mask Series No. 6* (1996) at Christie's Hong Kong in spring 2008. That yellow-ground, nearly 12-foot-wide diptych, a portrait of eight youths in shorts, red bandanas and white masks, garnered \$9.7 million—the top price ever paid for a contemporary Chinese artwork.

The New York show included 18 portraits of male subjects, clad variously in dress clothes, ranging from bust-like facial studies to full-length views, almost all featuring monochromatic backgrounds. Moving away from his early tendency toward caricature, Zeng presents a cast of relatively stoic characters, his signature preoccupation with the mask (nowhere in evidence in this show) having shifted to deadpan facial expressions and poses borrowed from the realm of fashion.

*Portrait 08-12-6* (2008)—a sympathetic rendering of a gawky hipster in red blazer, yellow T-shirt, baggy trousers