The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Rita Ackermann and Harmony Korine

By: ROBERTA SMITH

Published: January 13, 2011

Swiss Institute
495 Broadway, at Spring and Broome Streets
SoHo
Through Jan. 29

It makes a certain sense that the New York artist Rita Ackermann and the director (and occasional painter) Harmony Korine, who lives in Nashville, are friends. Their work is similarly improvisational and rough edged and tends to focus on gangs of young people who are up to no apparent good. Ms. Ackermann's paintings are often populated with bevies of almond-eyed young women, nude or almost, who loll about, watching. They seem to have wandered in from a cartoon-style Gauguin painting where My Little Pony dolls are not unknown; the densely painted surfaces that they inhabit often give them a slightly diabolical gravity.

Mr. Korine, first and still best known for his contribution to the screenplay to Larry Clark's 1995 movie "Kids," revels in misbehavior both conventional and genuinely off-putting. A cat or two has died for his art, specifically in his 1997 movie "Gummo." His latest, "Trash Humpers" (2009), follows four geriatric terrors (young actors in masks) as they shamble about Nashville, cackling, interacting with the locals and, as the title implies, feigning sex with garbage containers.

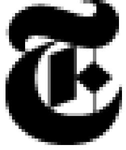
An anything-goes, if somewhat pat, energy pervades the pair's collaborative efforts — a group of large paintings, mostly on vinyl, and sliced-and-diced collages — which are having their debut at the Swiss Institute. The masked figures from "Trash Humpers," blown up to nearly life size, often function as ghosts in busy pictorial machines, sharing space with Ms. Ackermann's young women, tangles of brushwork and drawing, or thick slabs of monochrome. This is most effective in "secret klubs," where Mr. Korine's actors are all but obscured by the painted overgrowth, but counter the tactility with a wonderful ethereality. Equally strong, in a completely different way, is "high powered tramps," where rays of ballpoint-pen lines cast one of Mr. Korine's actors in a lurid nocturnal glow while a series of red shapes, taken from earlier drawings by Ms. Ackermann, suggests oncoming trains.

Too much else here reads as a fairly routine and sometimes quite lazy graft of the two opposing forces of 1980s art — Neo-Expressionist painting and Pictures Art — which weren't so far apart anyway. Outtakes from "Trash Humpers" are projected on the wall of one gallery, accenting the sinister, and displaying a certain debt to the video-performances of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley (not to mention the photographs of William Eggleston of Memphis).

Nonetheless, the take-away here is that Ms. Ackermann and Mr. Korine make a promising team. The show, whose title can't be printed here, also offers further proof that Ms. Ackermann, who has been evolving her strange art since the early 1990s, is due a survey.

A version of this brief appeared in print on January 14, 2011, on page C26 of the New York edition.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/14/arts/design/14galleries-RITAACKERMAN_RVW.html?_r=1



Double Trouble | Harmony Korine and Rita Ackermann at the Swiss Institute

CULTURE | By JOHANNA LENANDER | December 2, 2010, 10:06 AM

Photographs by Daniel Perez

When the young artists and old friends Rita Ackermann and Harmony Korine joined forces to create the work that would become "Shadow Fux," the show currently at the Swiss Institute, their concept was simple "Let's make something that has never been seen before."

Those may be big words, but they kind of pulled it off. Using stills from of Korine's 2009 film "Trash Humpers," as a canvas and color smears, glass shards, sand globs, ballpoint doodles and Xerox copies as their paint, the duo has indeed created a rich, disturbing and strangely alluring universe all its own. "Trash Humpers" is an ode to a group of grotesque and mischievous creatures with mummy-like faces, played by Korine and friends wearing face masks.

"When I was a kid I lived close to a rundown old people's home," he explains. "The residents were legendary in that neighborhood, and they were kind of like bogeymen. I have vivid memories of them staring into my pretty next-door neighbor's window. It has always stayed with me."

The project came about after Korine sent Ackermann a few stills and invited her to work on them. When Ackermann received the pictures she was stunned. "I called him up and I said: 'Oh my God, they are amazing! I can't touch them,'" she recalls. But Korine insisted she have her way with them.

Ackermann transformed the gritty images into striking and multidimensional collages of explosive colors and skewed perspectives. "Harmony's work is based on classic compositions but his images are controversial and unbearable," she says. "I wanted to show that this new aesthetic is what we have to accept now as classicism."

At first the collaboration was a long-distance one (Korine is based in Nashville; Ackermann lives in New York City) and without much communication. “What’s strange about Rita and I is that we don’t really talk that much about things,” says Korine.

But as the collaboration progressed they started spending more time together and worked on the pieces simultaneously. “In the beginning you can clearly define my work from Harmony’s work,” says Ackermann. “Then it slowly collides and in the end it’s almost one. It was an organic process, it was not at all about two people with egos who are watching each other’s next step. I almost consider this a one-person artwork.”

Korine concurs: “There’s no reverence!”

“Shadow Fux” is at the Swiss Institute through Jan. 23, 2011.

W
w

W EDITORS' BLOG

SHADOW FUX: THE COLLABORATION OF RITA ACKERMANN AND HARMONY KORINE

Reinforcing the old adage that two heads are better than one, renegade Nashville-based filmmaker Harmony Korine and New York fine artist Rita Ackermann have joined forces to create large-scale collage-based artworks that unite the creatives' respective disciplines.

Their exhibition, 'Shadow Fux', presented through the Swiss Institute, is the duo's first collaboration and takes as its point of departure Korine's controversial and psychologically jarring recent film,'Trash Humpers' (2009). Featuring drawings and large-scale paintings on vinyl and canvas, Ackermann and Korine reworked stills of 'Trash Humpers' overtly weird, alien-like cast of youthful misfits with haggard and aged faces to create new characters and narratives. Through a process of editing, splicing, painting and collaging, the resulting works reveal the pair's shared interest in fringe society and subversive culture with eerie compositions acting as monuments to the freaks, hysterics and eccentrics among us. Two confronting film pieces by Korine accompany the paintings: 'Pots and Pans' (2010) which documents a deaf Cuban family banging hysterically on pots and a

second piece made up of fragmented outtakes from ‘Trash Humpers’.

The collaboration began 18 months ago. “Ackermann and Korine, who are very good friends, started sending images back and forth, beginning their ‘call and response’ method of working together – taking inspiration from Korine’s beautiful, weird, abstract film, ‘Trash Humpers’,” explains Gianni Jetzer, the show’s curator. “Both artists share a fascination with really weird, strange beauty and fictional characters, which came through clearly in their works. It’s interesting because through their collage and painting technique, they paralleled the art of film-making as well as painting–it is a rare and wonderful exchange.”

“Shadow Flux” is open until January 22, 2011 at the Swiss Institute in New York.

Photos by Daniel Perez.
By **Indigo Clarke**
November 30, 2010

http://www.wmagazine.com/w/blogs/editorsblog/2010/11/30/shadow-fux-rita-ackermann-harm.htm

PURPLE FASHION *magazine*

RITA ACKERMANN *is surely one of the most inspired artists and free spirits of the New York art world. I first met her almost 20 years ago, shortly after she arrived in the US from Hungary. Rita decided to stay and work in New York City, and it was in this world of excessive drug-taking, fast sex, and perverse commerce that she became known for her drawings and collages of an innocent young girl, perhaps a surrogate of her own pure soul. Rita quickly became an iconic figure of the glory years of the '90s downtown New York scene, a kindred spirit of Sonic Youth, Harmony Korine, Chlöe Sevigny, Bernadette Corporation, and Richard Kern. But she never sold out for fame. Now she's full of new energy, gathering new people around her* – **experimenting with new forms** *for her drawings, collages, and paintings; giving performances and playing music. I met with Rita to talk about her romantic, poetic – and often conflicted – relationship with The American Dream.*

interview and portrait by OLIVIER ZAHM

OLIVIER ZAHM - Let's begin by talking about Michael Jackson. Why do you have all these images of The King of Pop?
RITA ACKERMANN - Because Michael Jackson is so beautiful. Maybe we should make a cognac toast to him. Rest in peace, Michael Jackson.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What should we drink, French or Japanese cognac?
RITA ACKERMANN - I only drink French cognac, Remy Martin. But it's not the best. The best I've ever had was at Almine and Bernard Picasso's house. You were there, remember?
That was so much fun.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You were more into ODB before, right?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yeah. ODB, Snoop Dogg, and Michael Jackson.

OLIVIER ZAHM - How do you explain their inspiration for you?
RITA ACKERMANN - It's not necessarily the music. The fact that Michael Jackson was an icon fascinates me – the charisma of the work, how his personality was an inseparable part of his iconic entity. When a media icon like Michael Jackson dies so suddenly their absence creates an unfinished legacy, which releases so many fantasy possibilities. Michael's death just before his "This Is It" tour was a masterpiece in itself. He left open the possibility that this really was it! Michael's life was his art, one he created single-handedly, in a way that he couldn't take any further, except by reaching the ultimate perfection. His body, his house, and his children were artworks. As they developed they consumed his life. He inhabited an imaginary world, a kingdom where he was the king who wanted to save the children of the world. He needed to be powerful to protect the weak. But he himself was also fragile, like a child. He loved so much, but he was also full of anger. He was a beautiful, freaky, weird looking, skeleton-like sculpture. His look served the way he danced, which was unlike anyone else – defying gravity, like walking on water. He was called "the liquid man" because of the way he danced. His voice did the same thing. When he sang he moved every part of his body. His melodies were built from his body and his superhuman gifts. He needed morphine because

BQE/CRASH IV, Spray paint, oil stick, paper cement, charcoal, oil, modeling paste on printed paper, 36 x 47 inches, 2009

such a state of existence is unbearable. Listen to the song "Morphine." He was fragile, graceful, the most humble of people, and at the same time violent and angry. He was able to compress a bulldozer and Bambi into one song. That's also the main focus of my own work. I want to show such a duality in its most raw form – with a fragility that triggers aggression. That's what I love about the recent Paul McCarthy drawings we saw. They're the same for me – Peter Pan or Snow White leading an imaginary army to fight against evil. They show their vulnerability by getting dirty. Michael had either the police or an army marching behind him. Remember his *HIStory* album?

OLIVIER ZAHM - In the movie, *This Is It*, there's a depiction of an army – and a 3-D image of a soldier.
RITA ACKERMANN - That's from *HIStory*, from the song "They Don't Care About Us." He must have been really angry. Plus, he was trying to protect his wife, Lisa Marie Presley, from his life. Some people don't like that song because it suggests dictatorship. But my favorite song ever is "Morphine," in which he talks about his drug addiction. The lyrics are insane. It's such a beautiful song. For the Macy's store windows I dressed, I recreated it with Agathe Snow, I tattooed the broken arms of mannequins over and over with the lyrics of "Morphine" – making the words illegible. The song is about Michael getting into drugs and how much he fears Daddy; and taking more and more morphine. He structures the song into two parts – extra violent beats, like screams, segue into a painfully soft melody. You hear him screaming and then he switches to his Bambi-like voice. Like McCarthy's "White Snow" show – like a little Bambi, Michael makes his voice almost unheard and then he says something about how he's taking more and more morphine and sleeping his life away. The language he uses is so simple and sharp. All artists should strive for that kind of perfection.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did you discover everything special about Michael in the film, *This Is It*?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, I didn't realize how graceful he could be when he tried to express his aversion to something. He communicated his feelings without being harsh or rude to people, almost in an abstract or metaphorical way. Maybe the more precise you are about your ideas, the better you're able to communicate them. I remember one bizarre moment in the movie when he said, "Ouch! My ear! My inner-ear! I feeling like someone's pushing something inside my ear!" Basically, what he wanted to say was, "The music's too loud!" I admire that because sometimes when you're passionate, when you're trying to get things right, you can easily become impatient and aggressive.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You can almost forget his singing sometimes because his dancing is so powerful.
RITA ACKERMANN - But you can't imagine one without the other.

OLIVIER ZAHM - I know of at least two other artists who have an obsession for Michael Jackson.
RITA ACKERMANN - Who?

OLIVIER ZAHM - There's Jeff Koons and his porcelain sculpture of Michael Jackson and Harmony Korine's movie *Mister Lonely*.
RITA ACKERMANN - That's true – with the Michael Jackson impersonator. That's one of my favorite movies. The scene in which Michael almost kisses Marilyn is the sexiest and saddest moment in cinema.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Let's start from the beginning. You've been in New York for about

20 years now, right?

RITA ACKERMANN - Since '92. But I spent two and a half years in Texas. So, 15 years in New York total.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Tell me about your life before you came to New York. Did you go to art school?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, for two years. But in Hungary you can't get into art school if you're not a master of drawing, so I had to train really hard to get in. In this period we were under Communism, as we were for most of the time I lived in Hungary. To get into art school, people started training at 15 years old.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Was it the only art school in Hungary?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, only 500 spots, and about 5,000 people trying to get in. So it took really serious preparations. I knew someone who applied a dozen times. He already had a grey beard when he was accepted. But with art it really doesn't matter when you start. I think sometimes that starting later is better. I got in on my second try. But not long after I was accepted I got a grant to go to New York.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What attracted you to art?
RITA ACKERMANN - My parents aren't artists. I used to play tennis before I decided to train for art – I was on the court every day. I always joke with my friends that if I stop doing art I can always go back to tennis.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Were you really good at tennis?
RITA ACKERMANN - Actually, I was bad, but I had good style. I worked fanatically on my form, which turned out to be really great for my art. All that discipline, the suffering, and torture, four hours every day, winter and summer. I learned by working hard and by focus. Without that I probably would have fallen apart over here. I knew how to struggle for what I wanted. Also, coming from a small country – from the East Bloc, moreover – feeds a certain kind of insecurity. I always felt I had to do more, to be better than the locals.

OLIVIER ZAHM - I guess you had the desire to achieve.
RITA ACKERMANN - Maybe. I had a lot of energy and was very motivated, but I was ashamed to be Eastern European. But it strengthened my impulse to do better.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Was it really so bad to have come from Hungary?
RITA ACKERMANN - No. Hungary was a cultural paradise. You could get a college degree by the time you were 18. And high school was like college: a super education. Also there wasn't much else to do but study and read. At that time, after you finished school there was no competition because there was nothing to compete for. There were no positions. You couldn't actually get ahead or have a career. So everyone was kind of watering their gardens. Artists were bought by the government. Every year artists gave some of their work to the state and for that they received a monthly salary. So you could spend your life doing nothing. There was a joke about not producing too much, because it was so hard to store artworks.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did you really want to leave Hungary? Did most young people want to leave?
RITA ACKERMANN - There was a general feeling that you were a loser if you were still there – that you weren't brave enough to leave. I was raised with the idea that you had to leave if you wanted to do something better. That was the feeling until the wall came down. I lived in a Communist atmosphere and I was sort of happy. I would not have come to New York if this amazing offer on a silver platter hadn't been held out to me. My schooling here was paid for and I stayed with a wonderful woman who basically adopted me. Didn't I ever tell you about this? It was a help-falling-from-the-sky situation.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You're talking about the grant you received.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes. But it wasn't because this woman saw my art and said, "Oh, you're so talented! You need to come to the United States." She just liked me. She was just a New Yorker who was excited to discover Eastern European artists.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Was she a curator?
RITA ACKERMANN - She was a kind of gallerist who needed a translator. My teacher grabbed me and told me to translate for her. We spent a week together going to artists' studios.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So you were semi-adopted.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, by a wealthy American Upper East Side dealer! That's how I was able to come to New York. I guess it was my social skills that got me to New York. I lived with this woman for a little while and then I moved downtown and met some artists. In 1992 I met Rob Pruitt and he introduced me to the art world – Colin de Land, Tony Shafrazi, etc. They taught me how to communicate in the art world. I learned that in this world, the older artists, those already "in the game," introduce the younger ones to everyone and then everyone helps each other out. I don't know how I met Bernadette Corporation and Seth Shapiro. A bunch of us moved in together, into an apartment on the Lower East Side. I was lucky. Then I met you – was that '93 or '94?

OLIVIER ZAHM - It was in '93.
RITA ACKERMANN - Right. On 42nd Street. There was an art studio building next to the Hotel Carter and I had my first studio there. I was 21 or 22. That's the very best age to arrive in New York - you're old enough to be on your own and young enough to have no expectations. You can forget everything from the past and learn a new language, a new system. The city is like a really big school. Every conversation is an education.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did you immediately like New York?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, I liked the energy, the speed, and the perspective. The problem in Hungary was that there was no perspective – especially for people who had energy and needed space to move. I couldn't have stayed there. Whenever I go back I still feel like there's no room to move. I wanted to stretch myself, to expand in space. In New York there's so much space. Anything can happen here. You don't need to wait too long for things to happen – and I can't wait.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What were your plans when you arrived in New York?
RITA ACKERMANN - To learn how to stay alive. I wasn't really thinking of anything other than, "Wow, this is a great place. I want to stay here." I had no other goal than to be able to stay. I didn't want to go back to Hungary.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Legally, you were only allowed to stay a certain amount of time, right?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, three months. But after a month I knew I was going to stay longer. So I tried to figure out the small steps I needed to take to achieve that big goal. Like learning to speak English better. Nobody understood my English because my Hungarian accent was so strong. Maybe that's why I had to rely on my work to communicate.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What did you do to survive?
RITA ACKERMANN - I worked in restaurants. I didn't have a studio and all my drawings were on small-sized paper. Then somebody said, "Why don't you make one like this, but larger?" It was at the same time that I got the 42nd Street studio, so I could actually work on very large canvases. Drawings on big raw canvases – those were my first works.

If You Listen Carefully . . . I'll Show You How To Dance, collage, charcoal, crayon, pen, ink and tape on paper, 25 x 38 1/4 inches, 1995

OLIVIER ZAHM - So you began with drawing.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, I went from drawing to painting to collage and performance; and finally I came back to compositions, with all media. Starting out from a composition of an earlier artwork is like recycling, or using old auto parts to build a new cat. It simplifies things, like scrambling up an alphabet. I rip my old things apart and put them back together. I have this vocabulary and I mix it with information from outside.

OLIVIER ZAHM - How did you come up with your half you/half Bambi work?
RITA ACKERMANN - Something punched my inner eye and it came out. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM - Is it a kind of self-portrait?
RITA ACKERMANN - Well, because of my communication problem here, finding myself in a new language, I couldn't be the person I was in my own language. One's own language is kind of a crutch to lean on. I wasn't able to communicate because no one understood me. That image of myself represented the language of a mute. But my images are also dancing images, although the dances are very abstract. The drawings communicate this visually. The figures don't really do anything and the drawings don't illustrate a story, although many people have tried to say it was my story, or that it was something about the lifestyle of the Lower East Side. I try to communicate emotions, not illustrate anybody's story. I wasn't shooting heroin. They're iconic images.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You did some work for the shop, Liquid Sky. They asked you to do a wall painting, right?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes. That's how I first made money and how I met the model Mary Frey and Chlöe Sevigny. Mary was the boss. She would tell Chlöe or me to sweep up, or to make this or that, and we were happy to do it for her. Mary was a beautiful boss and she was always right. Seriously. If I said, "Mary, I heard this about that," she'd say, "Let me tell you a story about that." She's funny that way. Carlos, a Brazilian OJ, ran the store. But I think it began in the '80s and that it was based on the movie, *Liquid Sky*, which I saw three years later. It blew my mind. The store actually had nothing to do with the movie. The movie expressed a kind of iconic feeling – of being cool, in New York, on the top of the world, on drugs, completely out of it: which is why you seem so attractive. It's a general New York feeling – that you can only protect yourself if you're loaded. Then you can be The King of Cool, which is what everyone wants. That movie is full of lies about being on top of the world. Then everyone dies and turns into zombies. The Liquid Sky store was a party place to go and meet people and sell stuff. If you had a little something, you could exchange with somebody else's stuff and you could survive. The rave scene was like a kind of barbarian trading business.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You did the windows at the bar Max Fish on Ludlow Street. Did you find a gallery around the same time?
RITA ACKERMANN - I didn't have a gallery, but dealers started becoming interested in my work and I needed help in sales. Andrea Rosen was looking for new artists and she asked Felix Gonzalez-Torres and John Currin for their opinion. I remember that Andrea said that Felix had said something to her about me, and then John came to visit me at my studio. It was risky for her to give me a solo show because I came from nowhere, but she did.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Bill Felix came from Cuba, another communist country.
RITA ACKERMANN - Maybe that's why he liked my work. He came from nowhere, too.
OLIVIER ZAHM - And, on the opposite

end of the spectrum, John Currin studied at Yale.
RITA ACKERMANN - Exactly. Andrea Rosen needed both worlds in her pool of artists.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So, this iconic little girl suddenly became famous. You incarnated the downtown lifestyle in this little creature.
RITA ACKERMANN - But, if you think about it, she may still represent the same thing now. There's no great difference. I didn't really create the image for that time.

OLIVIER ZAHM - But it was seen as an expression of the time, the Sonic Youth period.
RITA ACKERMANN - I didn't know Sonic Youth. I didn't know much about New York underground cool. But then I saw "Sugar Kane" with Chlöe and I loved it!

OLIVIER ZAHM - You said New York was like a school for you.
RITA ACKERMANN - I learned about Sonic Youth through Chlöe and Harmony Korine. I was painting the New Museum's windows on Broadway and Thurston knocked on the window and asked me if he could have a drawing for the album cover.

OLIVIER ZAHM - He was just passing by and saw you there?
RITA ACKERMANN - He lived on Lafayette Street. He was doing his solo album. He liked the window painting and asked if he could use it for the album cover. When I told Chlöe about it she was like, "Oh, my God!"

OLIVIER ZAHM - I remember you in your shiny blue miniskirt.
RITA ACKERMANN - Bad style. But at that time it was probably OK. That was how we dressed – miniskirts, Dr. Scholl's wooden shoes, and tank tops. It was good times at my 42nd Street studio. The feeling in the air was one of violence, danger, emergency, police prosecution, drug dealing, and porn. The Hotel Carter was a monstrous danger-house. It was dangerous but I didn't know it. Once I went to the Hotel Carter to call my mom. I usually used the pay phone in the back lobby of the hotel, but it was out of service. This guy said, "Come on up. You can call her from my room." I was kind of naïve and stupid. I went up with him, slowly realizing it was a bad decision. He went to the bathroom while I called my mother – poor mama. It was like being in that street-kids movie, *Streetwise*.

OLIVIER ZAHM - That was the end of the old 42nd Street era.
RITA ACKERMANN - They threw us out. New York isn't dangerous anymore, although it's still kind of dangerous in my neighborhood in Brooklyn. I can smell it in the air. But I like having a studio in a dangerous area. I think it's good for the work. Being aware is always better.

OLIVIER ZAHM - what do you like about having your studio in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn – out of the city?
RITA ACKERMANN - I like that my studio feels like a sanctuary. I feel safe inside, while outside it's a war zone. I feel protected by my own madness. I also like the isolation. It might be a tornado in here, but outside it's scary. I thrive on that.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So, at the time you were close to Mark Borthwick, Mark Gonzales, Harmony Korine, Chlöe Sevigny, and Richard Kern.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, all these people became good friends and collaborators.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You were also part of the alternative fashion scene in New York at the time – people like Bernadette Corporation, Seth Shapiro, Susan Cianciolo, Bruce, Andre Walker, etc.
RITA ACKERMANN - Seth Shapiro and I were inseparable for a summer. He tore apart our bathroom, went out for a pack of cigarettes, and never came back. He's totally disappeared now. Susan Cianciolo and I were great friends and we helped each other in every way we could. She was just starting in fashion and we encouraged each other.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Didn't you share a place on Canal Street with her?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes. Then she had her first fashion show at Andrea Rosen's gallery.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Was that the first time a fashion designer had a show in collaboration with a renowned gallery?
RITA ACKERMANN - Maybe. But it was out of necessity. Susan had no money. So I asked Andrea, and she said yes. It wasn't a concept, like, "Oh, let's do an artsy fashion show in a gallery." These people were just artists with less resistance to the bullshit of high-end fashion. At Colin de Land's American Fine Arts, Bernadette Corporation became an art concept, an art collective just like the Art Club 2000 had been. Colin supported them as performance artists. I loved the fashion show they did with the teddy bear and the cheerleaders in Chelsea somewhere, maybe at Pat Hearn's gallery.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Why did you leave New York at the end of the '90s? Did you feel like it was the end of an era?
RITA ACKERMANN - I don't know. I fell madly in love with David Nuss [the drummer and founder of No-Neck Blues Band). We got married and had a baby. We left for Texas in 1999. Disappearing let me restart where I wanted to in the art scene. I needed a break from New York. David was a commune kind of guy, but I'm very private, so there were some misunderstandings. I wanted to keep the studio door closed, and not have people walking through my life and my art.

OLIVIER ZAHM - When you deiced to have a baby with David, did you worry about the consequences it would have on your career?
RITA ACKERMANN - I wasn't really thinking about what would happen or how things would change. I didn't know how it would affect things until I experienced it. But, like you say, life and art live together. And I have never been a careful person.

OLIVIER ZAHM - It was nice to see you and David together. He looked so angelic, almost like a character in one of your drawings.
RITA ACKERMANN - He's a beautiful man.

OLIVIER ZAHM - He's like your Ameritan brother – pale skin, blonde hair, beautiful eyes.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yeah, a brother from another planet. The blue eyes were a surprise.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You were a beautiful couple.
RITA ACKERMANN - And we had a beautiful baby – all good reasons to run away from
New York.

OLIVIER ZAHM - But why did you go to Texas?
RITA ACKERMANN - David is from Texas, and we needed help and focus to simplify things. New York was made for professional parents. That's not exactly what we were. Texas represented the raw iconic freedom of the American life – the Marlboro man on the horse with his lasso, the bikers, the trailer park cowboys, the bizarre Christian churches spreading like mushrooms, the pageant shows, and the naïveté of the Southwest. It

was exciting to dig into all these inspirations, but it soon became clear that these same sentimental values helped the dumbest man on earth become President. So the fascination disappeared. It was very scary to watch it up close – especially when I knew that before Bush, Texas was actually considered cool.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Texas reminds many Europeans of the film, *Easy Rider* – they think that artists are in danger of losing their lives there.
RITA ACKERMANN - Maybe it's the urban fear of American barbarism – the cowboy, the horses, the nature, and the cars – that was part of my visual vocabulary from the beginning. Going down there was something like doing fieldwork. It was like getting into the deep insides of America.

OLIVIER ZAHM - How deep?
RITA ACKERMANN - I already used pop iconography of the American wilderness in my work, so I thought I should go and live in it. It was great that I had a chance to explore trailer park culture and to befriend local Indians and dolphin trainers. But with these curiosities, we created a barrier between the society we supposedly belonged to and the new one we were trying to socialize. David's family was waiting patiently for us to find a church and become part of a community – to find new friends, to grow into a social life that would tie us to the life of a small Texas town.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You're Christian, aren't you?
RITA ACKERMANN - I'm Catholic by birth, but I don't go to church.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Do you believe in God?
RITA ACKERMANN - I believe in a higher power. Right now I believe in gods that are partly human, like the ancient Greek gods. Not like the Scientologists who are shopping for theirs. You can become your own god. In Texas that wasn't quite the case.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did people give you a hard time?
RITA ACKERMANN - They thought I was a little freakish, but everyone was kind and warm. I created a sort of bubble around me. I had a painting studio in the garage. During the day it would get so hot I'd leave the garage door open and literally paint on the street. That was a spectacle for our neighborhood. I also wore clothes that might not have been appropriate for my social status and I didn't do the roots of my hair. I made bizarre choices in order to isolate myself and concentrate on my work. Do you remember what I looked like at that time? I looked raw, untouchable.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Like a kind of nun.
RITA ACKERMANN - A nun protesting the conservative Christian social system's rules for keeping people in line. But I wasn't really conscious of my behavior or image. It all happened naturally.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Where in Texas did you live?
RITA ACKERMANN - Corpus Christi.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Corpus Christi is such a beautiful name. Why did you go there?
RITA ACKERMANN - David's family. Corpus Christi is unique in that it's only 15% white – the Counts and the Princes. The rest are Mexicans.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What does aristocracy mean for Americans? Europeans can't really imagine an American aristocracy.
RITA ACKERMANN - The American aristocracy is different. Did you see the movie, *Giant*? That movie made Elizabeth Taylor a role model for American princesses. Michael Jackson knew that. Elizabeth was his princess – and he was the king. He was looking for princesses and he found Elizabeth in *Giant*. Taylor's character stands up to these aggressive loud drunk American businessmen. A lot of women in Texas still want to be like Elizabeth Taylor in *Giant*. They even want to have her waist size. It's crazy. In the film she serves tea to arguing, drunk men. She's full of passionate opinions, but she knows that she has to remain on the sofa in a corner and not interrupt.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You stayed in Texas for about three years, right?
RITA ACKERMANN - Two-and-a-half – from '99 to 2001. In Texas, I quickly felt too isolated. We moved back to New York in September 2001. A week before the towers went down! I also missed the art community, especially what Colin de Land and Pat Hearn created around them. [Colin de Land died of cancer in 2003. His wife, Pat Hearn, died in 2000.] Theirs was the only program that was run by artistic people. I came back at the very end of that period, and through my connections with Lizzi Bougatsos and Jess Holzworth, I felt like I knew where I belonged. American Fine Arts was a utopian art community. Kids could go there and work and show their work, and Colin was like their godfather, holding it all together. Unfortunately, there's no place like that now. Someone needs to do that again.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Colin's system was more like an anti-system.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, and it was educational. It was anti but also very pro. I felt very anti-system in the mid '90s. I didn't like artists. I didn't have any established artist friends. I didn't want to belong to that institutional world. Every time my gallerist tried to invite me to participate in something, I would literally throw a sort of bizarre fit. I still do that sometimes. I don't feel comfortable at art events – I'm not very good at remembering names and dates, and there's a lot of that in art conversations. Even if I know the artworks and the shows I'm still not able to translate it into information. But I think that maybe this disadvantage was actually a good thing for me.

OLIVIER ZAHM - But your gallerist, Andrea Rosen, was a positive influence.
RITA ACKERMANN - She never pushed. She always told me to just do what I wanted to do. She let me be very independent. We had rough times, and I wish we could have communicated more, but in the end it all worked out for the best.

OLIVIER ZAHM - I remember that she pushed you to do a large-scale painting show – some of your family from Hungary came to see it.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yeah, the paintings with my brother. That was really an escape, a concept of doing something totally different from the work that I was known for, something more sellable. I had this three-year period that ended with those paintings. Then I began getting deeper into collage and into using more male imagery. I separated myself from the work with these things, moved into new territory, including performance and music.

OLIVIER ZAHM - When you came back to New York from Texas, you moved to Harlem. Did you do that to isolate yourselves from the downtown scene?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, but it also made the commune idea more of a possibility. I wasn't very connected at the time. Having a big studio in Harlem and a baby was all I could manage.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did you feel isolated again, being far from Downtown?
RITA ACKERMANN - I lived in a communal situation, but I still felt alone. My problem was more how to combine being an artist with having a family. I had difficulties addressing my needs back then. I struggled with the guilt-driven Eastern European tradition, the inferiority, and the values that an Eastern European woman brings to a relationship. That was a struggle. I'm really lucky to be finished with that struggle.

OLIVIER ZAHM - I remember it was difficult to visit you in Harlem.
RITA ACKERMANN - Did you visit me up there? That's amazing. David probably had a hard time with you, with the way you relate to women. He didn't understand our relationship. It was the manly American thing versus the French thing.

OLIVIER ZAHM - He was always a bit cold to me.
RITA ACKERMANN - You fit into a certain category of French men for him. Frog! Down with the froggies! American guys think all you guys are skirt chasers. It's very competitive.

OLIVIER ZAHM - He wasn't very funny, but he was always nice.
RITA ACKERMANN - Diplomatic and respectful. You're one of the only long lasting important male friendships I have. And I treasure those friendships.

OLIVIER ZAHM - I treasure our friendship too! So, you arrived at the beginning of September 2001 – just one week before New York completely changed.
RITA ACKERMANN - After September 11th I was panicked to be back, because all my friends were leaving the city to wait out the bad downtown air, to be in a safe place. At one point I was afraid nobody was going to come back. Also, David decided to stop playing music to become a priest. You remember that huge monastery where I lived uptown for three years, on 122nd Street?

OLIVIER ZAHM - I went there for a dinner with David's professor at the seminary, a Romanian Orthodox priest.
RITA ACKERMANN - I had to decide whether I wanted to be a priest's wife or an artist – which I couldn't be in Texas. A priest's wife helps keep the congregation together, nurtures the community, and supports the priest. Whatever the priest does, the priest's wife has to devote herself to it. It was impossible for me to be a partner in his calling. I already had a mission. I would have had to give up being a serious artist. When we realized this contradiction our troubles began.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So, New York changed and so did your life.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes. My life was all *inbetween*. We had an apartment in the church. David was studying theology. I was making art and getting to know the new art community that was more or less based downtown.

OLIVIER ZAHM - After you came back to New York and reconnected with Lizzi Bougatsos, you started playing music and giving performances with her. Had you ever given performances before?
RITA ACKERMANN - I did some puppet shows before that, which I liked very much. With Lizzi I half-improvised and half-planned the performances. They were based on a dadapop shrine, which made no sense and had no meaning. We included our bodies as parts of a sculpture we built for the performance, which was like the one we did in Paris at the Purple Institute. That was my favorite performance ever with her.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Do you have pictures of it?
RITA ACKERMANN - Not many. Things were stolen after the performance in Paris – even my lipstick. Lizzi was on your motorcycle, holding a flag and singing. I kept changing outfits, as part of the act. We were busy. Meanwhile, people from the audience were coming up to the stage area and taking things from the shrine like they were souvenirs.
OLIVIER ZAHM - I didn't know that.
RITA ACKERMANN - No? But it was a good thing. I remember one guy in particular, kind of hiding behind a column, wearing a big fur hat, looking a little suspicious, but excited. He took most of the shrine. But I didn't mind.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So performances were a new thing for you.
RITA ACKERMANN - The improvised, not-making-sense kind, yes! We did our first one in Zurich in 2002, then one in Paris, and a big last one in New York in 2004 at Kenny Schachter's space. What was new was our using our bodies as material. Then we used artworks as material. The gallery was like an extension of a studio. We curated a show in which every artist was part of the performance – and everything we used was left behind to be the exhibition.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Wasn't it a kind of buffet dinner?
RITA ACKERMANN - It was a kind of sacrificial dinner. We laid ourselves down on the top of a half-finished dinner, as if offering ourselves to be eaten. There was a pig's head, and candles burning, so it was all a bit voodoo.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Like The Last Supper?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yeah, a pagan one. Purposeless paganism. These performances were like nonsense séances. We didn't know what we were doing and there was no expected outcome. We were deeply involved in the pure act of playing.

OLIVIER ZAHM - But they seemed to reactivate the '70s performances of artists like Hermann Nitsch.
RITA ACKERMANN - In Viennese Actionist performances the female body has a function. Lizzi and I performed a sort of comic version of that, because our bodies were useless, doing things for no reason.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Performance art is rare these days.
RITA ACKERMANN - But it hasn't disappeared. I saw a really good one by Kai Althoff last summer. And Jonathan Meese. Lizzi and I were laughing at paganism and loving it at the same time.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You were also singing. You started a band with Lizzi and Jess Holzworth.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, we started Angelblood together. Jess's esthetic was very much part of Angelblood. Our first album came out in 1999, right before I moved to Texas. But, Jess moved to San Diego and now lives in LA. The end of Angelblood came when we started taking it seriously as a musical group. I always wanted to keep it as and art project. I was already writing songs and recording some stuff in Texas. We were good, fast, and instinctual in the recording studio because our process wasn't about making a real album to tour with, but just about making art.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Let's get back to New York.
RITA ACKERMANN -- After the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center the feeling of emergency and terror in the air was very

ile, broken, on edge, like something might happen. That was also a very hopeful and optimistic time, anticipating the changes it would all bring. I remember having these great conversations about it. Philosophers brainstormed and issued statements about the future. Susan Sontag published a short commentary in *The New Yorker* criticizing America that was blood-boiling good. Jean Baudrillard and Francis Fukuyama wrote about the end of history - do you actually believe in that?

OLIVIER ZAHM - September 11th created a sudden feeling that focused on that historical time, the one we're still in. It's a traumatic time – events seem at the same time absolutely horrible and virtual, unpredictable and artificial, ultra-violent and somehow unreal.
RITA ACKERMANN - Maybe this means that history exists only in the imagination, that after this apocalypse we now live without history, or we live beyond it – because afterward everything became available on the Internet: less present in reality, more virtual. We don't need to print photos anymore, only to delete the bad ones on our cameras. We can kill history. Anything and everything can be immediately erased.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Disconnected from a center.
RITA ACKERMANN - You can have a relationship overseas without leaving your apartment. In New York the feeling was that, if you left your house, you'd be in danger, that anything could happen. On the Internet you can have amazing relationships and connections without experiencing the sweaty hands and the physical confrontation.

OLIVIER ZAHM - But slowly, in 2002 and 2003, a new scene started to emerge with Agathe Snow, Dash Snow, Ryan McGinley, Dan Colen, and Nate Lowman, and your old scene was gone.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, I met Agathe in this new atmosphere. She was the perfect mover and shaker for this kind of emergency. She's an apocalypse kind of girl. With my communist ways I only knew how to communicate on a very sort of bring-people-together way, at dinners and parties where you dance your life away, and this was very much Agathe's way, too – to have fun and entertain yourself and others. We met at the hub of the apocalypse. We started giving these campy, gypsy-style dinner parties, keeping them spontaneous and immediate, in Paris, New York, and Zurich.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What kind of art parties did you organize with Agathe?
RITA ACKERMANN - It wasn't about playing music then. We were throwing emergency parties to entertain ourselves. But they were artistically and conceptually imagined. We would have lots of fun planning them, wanting to make situations for people. We called our parties The Stone Soup, named after the folktale about poor people who have nothing to eat. A man, poor himself, comes to town and says, "Oh, you guys don't have anything to eat? No problem. Everyone bring one thing from your house and we'll cook a soup together." He puts a rock in the bottom of a big pot to start the soup. Someone else brings a carrot, another one brings an onion, and so on, until there's a stone soup, the most delicious soup in the world. It's like a collage soup version of the exquisite corpse.

OLIVIER ZAHM - It was like a performance.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yeah, it was a way of communicating. At that point Agathe Snow wasn't ready to be an artist so she expressed herself by feeding her community.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did this new context of artists around dash Snow feel like a new movement of more like an extension of what you experience before you left town?
RITA ACKERMANN - At that time I was just doing things with Agathe and her friends, who were almost like my family. But I was careful not to barge into their mix. They came from a generation I had no connection to. Especially since I'd been hidden away in Southeast Texas. I liked them and I was afraid of them at the same time. I admired how they supported each other and how they worked together, while each of them remained individually strong. I wanted to learn more about them.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Many of the younger artists took drugs. How do you manage to stay away from drugs?
RITA ACKERMANN - I was never interested in drugs. I don't like conversations that last from 3 A.M. to 9 A.M. I'd rather dance – without drugs, just with drinking water. Dancing is all about movement. Doing drugs is about sitting down and talking. I'm not very good at sitting down or talking. I'm always in motion, even in my art. I move nonstop, which can be annoying, I know. But it has saved me from drugs.

OLIVIER ZAHM - New York was under construction again and it seemed like artists were being shooed out of Manhattan into Brooklyn.
RITA ACKERMANN - This new group of artists, including myself, was not rich at all... But we didn't know if money was really going to matter during those fearful times. We were shocked when the money just kept rolling in around 2004 and 2005, more than ever before. Everything became so expensive. Real estate went boom. Lots of new apartment buildings and new hotels. Old Manhattan neighborhoods were torn down. From then on it was really hard for artists to find studios in Manhattan. But Brooklyn still had big spaces.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Another aspect of your work with Lizzi Bougatsos was to curate group shows.
RITA ACKERMANN - We curated two or three shows based on using art as material, on extending our bodies into the performance, and extending our performance into artwork. It was like a chain of media – art objects, our bodies, the space – everything entered into the chain of things we linked together.

OLIVIER ZAHM - To you, was curating group shows a form of art?
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes. It was expanding our vision. It was a multidimensional work which included material from other artists.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Who did you include in the project?
RITA ACKERMANN - Louise Bourgeois, Christopher Wool, and even Picabia. Lizzi brought in artists from the Pat Hearn gallery, people like Jack Pierson and Jeff Elrod, artists she knew from working for Colin de Land. We scrambled them all together. We weren't intimidated by the artworks. We used a piece by Louise Bourgeois that cost $100,000 as part of a collage, a multidimensional one that even had sound. At one point we had this Polish subway violinist play under a Jeff Elrod painting. The atmosphere itself was the artwork. We splattered mud on the walls, as if the earth had vomited mud on the walls. And Lizzi brought in two hamburger buns to use as breasts and a whip to use as a dick.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did you feel like you were making a feminist statement two girls, curating shows in an art world still dominated by men?

BQE/CRASH III, spray paint, oil stick, paper cement, charcoal, oil, modeling paste on printed paper, 36 x 42 inches, 2009

RITA ACKERMANN - Lizzi was more aware of that than I was. I'd never really had much interest in it. But sometimes I like being unaware of things so that I can deal with them myself, without intimidation or premeditation. I don't separate great feminist artists from great non-feminist artists like Lynda Benglis or Y Pants. Feminism was never an issue for me.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Are you more inspired by men, like Franz Binder or ODB?
RITA ACKERMANN - It's not a question of someone's sex; it's their charisma. Men can have a strong female side. Just like you do! I'd like to interview you about women, because I think you know a lot about women.

OLIVIER ZAHM - My favorite subject! Was Cicciolina an inspiration for you?
RITA ACKERMANN - She interested me because she also came from Hungary's Communist working class. And she made it into the Italian parliament, championing the most progressive causes of the time. She also invented a new style of pornography. It was smart of Jeff Koons to recognize that. Her autobiography is in Italian and in Hungarian. I wish it would be translated into English. She led a very sexual and eccentric life, one she created for herself. She made porn films with a photographer friend of hers that were almost like action movies. Once they flew to an island in an Islamic country and on the way they enticed the flight attendants to act in the movie. At the hotel on the island they found more amateur participants. They found this guy with a boat. There she is, fucking the boatman, while back on shore the Muslim police are going bananas. And it was all totally improvised. It was a political scandal. She was arrested. The police searched her hotel looking for the film, but she hid it in the shower drain. She might have had to spend the rest of her life in jail. She has lots of crazy stories like that. It's fascinating – the way people will risk their lives for the things they're passionate about.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So you were finally invited to the Whitney Biennial in 2008. Was it finally a recognition of your status as an American artist?
RITA ACKERMANN - I was very excited! But, In 2005 I had already had a big collage show at Andrea Rosen, which was really the

first historical presentation of my work. But it's often hard to think of your work in a tight historical context. The collages I did in '95 look exactly like collages from 100 years ago, even though they have pop images in them.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You said that you now have a vocabulary you work with, one that you take apart and recombine. Is it like the elements in a puzzle?
RITA ACKERMANN - Exactly. I deconstruct something and then rebuild it, mixing an old composition with something new, for example. I like to make things that make me slightly uncomfortable. I don't like to know where things are heading. I don't want to make things that are too easy or simply satisfy me, but rather things that surprise me. Now I build things I haven't seen before, from the elements I know the most about. I like it when I have no idea where a work will take me – to have trust that it will take me somewhere. That's the perfect moment, one that hopefully will last forever.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What about the female figure you're so known for? You let her go for a while.
RITA ACKERMANN - That female figure is part of my language. She's as abstract as Pinocchio or Bambi. It's a pop icon about fragility, not sexuality.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What kind of paint do you use?
RITA ACKERMANN - I'll paint with anything. There's no limit. I'll even use spray paint and dirt. I like spray paint because I'm not very good with it, not like the graffiti guys. I love the accidental results you can get with spray paint. Spraying is a violent gesture. I use it when I want to take a painting out of the comfort zone – maybe it will take a long time to clean it up. Spray paint also has a dangerous side – the smell of it makes me lose my mind.

OLIVIER ZAHM - What about oil paint?
RITA ACKERMANN - I don't like to use a brush that much. I use my hands most of the time. The brush is really an extension of the finger, which is an extension of the hand. Actually, my first painting was a finger painting of a dancing fairy with creatures around her playing music. I won an art contest in elementary school. I used Tempera paint on Styrofoam. I was eight years old and that painting brought me success, which is a great feeling.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You recently went back to Texas.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, to Marfa, a small town down by the Mexican border. The closest city is EI Paso.

OLIVIER ZAHM - It's like the end of America.
RITA ACKERMANN - Exactly – out in the desert, where all the tension between America and Mexico occurs. There's a lot of drug trafficking, for one thing. It's a dangerous place. You can easily get shot by mistake. But the locals protected me. I was working at the Chinati Foundation, a foundation set up by the Donald Judd Foundation for artists to come and work in Marfa. He fell in love with the place and then split his time between Marfa and New York City. Nearby, in the desert, there was an airfield and a camp where Second World War German war prisoners were held. They actually lived very well in these concrete barracks, which now house a museum and apartments for artists. Now it's The Chinati Foundation prison camp. [Laughs] Basically, I lived in a prison. A very monastic lifestyle, as you can imagine.

OLIVIER ZAHM - A rigid existence.
RITA ACKERMANN - All the lines are vertical or horizontal. There's only one road in and out of Marfa. You can't miss it when you're driving through the desert. [Laughs] *Giant* was shot in Marfa. *No Country For Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood* were both shot in Marfa, at the same rime. They both won Oscars.

OLIVIER ZAHM - It most be a very cinematographic country.
RITA ACKERMANN - Yes, but there's also something brutal about it. My brutal side exploded. There's a tiny Andy Warhol museum there. It has only three paintings.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did you meet men?
RITA ACKERMANN - I stayed there for a month and half and had an amazing time with straight men. There were only men there and they all became good friends. It was a bit like Arthur Miller's *The Misfits*, in the way Marilyn Monroe's character is so dominating – she's powerful but also needs to be protected by these three men, men who reveal their best and worst sides in relating to her. All this happens in five minutes – the desert, wild horses, three men, and Marilyn Monroe. I felt something like that in Marfa. You become one body and then you're undone from that body. There's so much space. It really eats you up. So much sky, so much desert. You become non-human.

OLIVIER ZAHM - You became part of nature.
RITA ACKERMANN - More like an alien. You can even start fantasizing about UFO landings and extraterrestrial abduction.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Did this Marfa experience give you energy?
RITA ACKERMANN - It gave me the energy to make a three-meter tall painting. It's gigantic. And look how small I am! [Laughs] It's everything I wanted to make. I came back in April and I took the studio in Brooklyn so I could create a little bit of Marfa for myself. I needed to go there. I was doing Plexiglas collages for two years before that. I titled them "Under Pressure" because I pressed brute energy between two pieces of Plexiglas, like making a sandwich. My Brooklyn studio let me undo this jam – gave me a chance to do something big. The lights in Brooklyn, over by the highway, are almost like those in the desert. Highways are like the desert. You can't stop until you get somewhere. You have to keep on going. You have to proceed. And that's me! [Laughs and sings] "Don't stop 'til you get enough!" And I never do get enough.

END

STREET AND STUDIO. FROM BASQUIAT TO SÉRIPOP

KUNSTHALLE wien
Verlag für moderne Kunst
Nürnberg

THE CITY: A BRUTE SCULPTURE GARDEN. WITH HIGH SPEED THROUGH NEW YORK'S CONCRETE JUNGLE.
Rita Ackermann in conversation with Cathérine Hug.

Cathérine Hug: Since when do you work here in Brooklyn? What does this studio mean for you? How does your daily workday look like in this room?

Rita Ackermann: I work here since summer 2009. I moved out of my Manhattan studio after I had come back from a residency at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. Marfa is a desert town with one main road and the Chinati Foundation—a major conglomerate of museums consisting of the Donald Judd Collection[1], the John Chamberlain Collection[2], and some more important institutions. I worked in the Ice Plant, which was Judd's studio in a former camp for German prisoners of war during World War II. After that experience of space, light, and peace, there was no point of turning back. Those energies that got unleashed in my work had to keep on banging and I needed to find a space with a desert-like landscape in the urban environment, where all that freedom of explosive movements with the elements of violence and danger could thrive undisturbed. Where I can use industrial, toxic materials, and mediums, showing fragility with extreme physicality, crashing them up against each other, causing chaos and accidents. Where only a highway view is the outside and its monotone mobility relaxes me glancing at it, while inside I am in motion to clean up the biggest mess of multidimensional accidents on my paintings—and this is this Brooklyn studio, where I spend my everyday. For now, there is no better place to go. For later, maybe back to the desert.

CH: You just mentioned that with the paintings in the studio, you can sort of transfer the energy from your own body onto the canvas—with the materials and instruments of drawing and painting, of course. In contrast to this, photography is more of absorbing the impressions and to rely on your bodily sensors of registration. But then, when photographing do you go outside?

RA: Taking photos is a big part of my work and blends into it unnoticeably. When I travel I look for abandoned things, useless objects, crashed broken cars or machines neatly organized or about to be recycled in junkyards. These sites are the same everywhere in the world. You can't immediately tell the difference if the picture was taken in a Texan ghost town or a Hungarian village or in Athens, two streets down from the Dakis Collection. These are like sculpture gardens for me. I grew up amongst houses and cars that were half finished and literally homemade because of lack of money or material. Back then, somehow they represented shame, now they represent beauty in my eyes, and that can be finished in a photograph or a collage. It is, in a way, a personal attempt to give them perfection through making them art.

CH: You were talking about several spots where you love to go. The desert is one, the highways another—I was wondering about Hungary, this is a country you must have some relationship to, since you were born there.

RA: I grew up in Hungary. I didn't become an artist there, I wanted to. It gave me my education, a very strong aesthetic in art, a certain style that's untraceable and unrecognizable in the whole world. In Hollywood movies, when they try to make somebody very weird or kind of "from another planet" type, they always pull "the Hungarian" trick. I don't think it is just the language—it is truly a "thing" to be Hungarian. Not good, not bad but lonely since it doesn't belong to anywhere. I think that has been a general feeling of a Hungarian for centuries, no matter whether they live in their own country or a different one.
I go to Hungary more then two times a year since my entire family is there. It is very emotional. I would like to show my work in Hungary. It would mean a lot to my family and to me also. It takes time to build trust in the Hungarians and I accept that since I'm like that as well.

CH: Didn't you leave more than 20 years ago?

RA: No, I left in 1992.

CH: So, a lot must have changed since: how are your feelings about that? Your parents are still there. How do you talk about these changes? Is there also something that didn't change? How do you feel about all these changes within the countries and your own relationship to these countries—both in the US and in Hungary? Also, many things changed in New York because of 9/11, I'm wondering if this is, in any way, also a subject matter you are interested in and did it affect your work, or do you not want to talk about it?

RA: New York was always on high speed—in with the new, out with the old, back with the old, destroy the new. There is not a single possibility that isn't played out here. All the possible surprises mount up to no surprise. The result, funny enough, can have the same effect that communism had on the artists where I grew up. The good things that came out from this kind of atmosphere was not driven by irony but melancholic optimism. It was like a "time stands still" progression. It became a kindergarten of culture where artists were playing very seriously and the risks were so high and absurd that they could just avoid thinking of them.

Almost, like taking off into another sphere of reality. In New York City after 9/11, life became unpredictable. No one could really foresee the future, but one could always survive with the qualities of a nomad. And, I don't actually think that 9/11 had changed the barbarian, ruthless faces of New York. People say it became safer, I don't think so. It's as dangerous as it ever was, on a different way. Budapest has that similar uncanny quality of a sophisticated brute, no matter whether it was communism or capitalism. I chose New York because New York chose me—sounds like Joseph Beuys, ha-ha. New York gave me a perspective that I could stretch into. In New York, you could say I'm going to do this and if you have a strong will and force to get it done, people respect that and help, and then they criticize. In Hungary, before you would do anything, it was already criticized. That was not beneficial for the types like me. I really like to try, experience, destroy and rebuild, and, learn that way. In Hungary, it was a shame, if you admitted that you were just testing the waters, experimenting. Then we all pretended to be professors in "kindergarten" and never could learn new steps. Would one consider that as close-mindedness? I really think that Hungarians are not close-minded. They are absolutely unique with their ways of progression and as much I have grown together with another country, my Hungarian background never left me. This strange mixture of emotions and influences brings an uncategorizable element into my work that probably dominates the most, and even my own self has a hard time to comprehend its very nature.

CH: I would like to ask you now a completely different thing, but that might actually have a relationship to your childhood and youth in Hungary. Do you remember your first experience with art?

RA: It's my favorite question! I also like to ask that to artists. My parents weren't artists but they appreciated all forms of art and we went to museums all the time. I read Vincent Van Gogh's letters when I was 12, because I loved his paintings so passionately. One of my favorite books from age seven to now is a book in which masterpieces are explained by children. I forget the title but never forget that book. Mona Lisa is on the cover.
In Budapest, theatre and cinema were so full of life. There were breathtaking theatre performances that I often went to see up to five times. One was a play by Raymond Queneau (1903-76) called *Exercises in Style* (1947/engl. 1958); I also remember well my first Depeche Mode concert. When I was a teenager, the Hungarian avantgarde underground blew me away. Since I was underage and not a runaway, they didn't take me in, but I admired them from afar and they shaped the way I see. They had a certain style and vision that I have never encountered again. You can see and hear it in movies by Béla Tarr (*1955). Or Xantus János's seminal documentary *Rocktérítő* from 1988.

Studying at the Hungarian Art Academy was also a significant experience. I remember a lot of anatomy, philosophy and psychology classes and complete freedom in the painting studios. Those three years that I spent there was right then, when everything was changing and the old, communist system was falling apart. Nobody knew what or who will stay or go. It was an amazingly exciting sort of a "Lord of the Flies" student rule for a few years. Suddenly, all underground and radical was welcomed and all the channels opened to the West and nobody started copying it yet. It was a great time! Hungarian artists still had a strong honest sense of their own cultural path and were not feeling the suffocating pressure of competing with the West.

CH: If there is one adjective or notion that might most adequately describe the atmosphere in Vienna, a city so close to Budapest, the notion might be transition. A lot of things change. Maybe it's for me personally, I felt this strongly in the city where I grew up, which is Zurich. Comparing the 80s and early 90s to now, it was a city that started to be truly metropolitan and globalized, but that was probably a process in many different cities all over the world. With its positive and also negative side of it, a very large drug scene at that time, which for different reasons developed dramatically. But, there was also a lot of commitment of local people really wanting to change to the good and help. There was a lot of good energy to make this change possible. However, these were the late 80s and early 90s, so this is why I felt it as a transitory time, which also was the time of the fall of the Berlin wall.

RA: We passed the 1990s by now with two decades and strangely only now can we grasp some kind of understanding of what that decade meant. Slowly, we will be able to revisit the first ten years of the new century by *overcoming the trauma that it has passed. Maybe both were transitional*—but now thinking, is there any times when it doesn't feel transitional?

CH: Maybe in 10 years we will speak differently about it, new transitory times will break in and so on. You mentioned earlier that you like to drive fast on highways. How did it come? Did this start with your driving lessons?

RA: I love driving, but I don't have a car. A car always means luxury. I like driving alone to be in between places. My earliest memories of that feeling that I never really wanted to arrive, when I was on the road. It was some kind of perfect state of happiness existing in the motion. Taking time or gaining time. Stillness in mobility. In Texas, taking the long desert highways is an otherworldly experience. Nothing like it.

CH: But how about Marfa in Texas? I have never been there, but I have some prejudices and some preconditioned ideas of a city in the middle of the "urbanized" desert. What characterizes, in your opinion, that place?

RA: Marfa is a village. It's fascinating how the rawness of nature and the pantheon of culture collide together there. There is a lot of space and a sense of time that one can obtain immediately by entering town. You automatically slow down and breath in the freedom. I think this kind of freedom comes from man humbling himself by the power of the untamed vast land. I have a friend from there, who is taking care of a ranch that is the size of New York City. When we took off to visit the ranch we drove three hours into the desert until we get to its gate. Then it turned out that it was another two hours driving to the house or headquarters. I chickened out and turned back to town, because ultimately I'm as urban as one can get. The industrial desert of Brooklyn is all that I need to expand myself and be able to breath in this moment.

CH: You are talking about yourself and your very personal relationship to your studio.

RA: In Manhattan, it is a claustrophobic environment, and this paradoxically, both in extravert and introvert ways. Artists are often hypersensitive and the amount of information that they are exposed to and digest in this city is mad. It is also a social claustrophobia, where almost like a psychic, you learn to be able like a medium to pick up on every single emotion that is floating around you. It is some kind of mastering how not to let this effect your own emotions but benefit from this sensitivity. I believe in bipolarities. A person who is an "iceberg top and a volcano bottom." I think that violence and grace is the greatest match. I find it stunning, if aggression and violence that comes from vulnerability succeeds. Best scene in the worst movie is when an untransformed wolfman—bandaged down in a medical science auditorium for a presentation of the impossibility of the existence of wolfman – breaks his chains and bondages and bites the heads of the doubters. You want to see that this destroyed powerless monster that everybody was afraid of, wins his power back and kills them all. You want to see the monster fragile and you want to see it powerful. Poor Michael Jackson—smooth criminal. His *Morphine* (1997) is a multidimensional, ambiguous poetry.

CH: When looking around your studio I can see for example a book of Diego Velázquez[3], or Jim Dine[4].

RA: I love books on artists. I look at and read them to learn about the person.

CH: What you just said about the so-called "social claustrophobia," I think can also be detected in Basquiat's work. Even though it is seldom associated with him, because people generally are more interested in another, much more obvious formal characteristic in his work, which are his visual outbursts of energy and ideas.

RA: When you look at Basquiat's complete body of work, it is unbelievable that it has been done in such a short period of only eight years. And, it was all done on drugs. We don't know whatever would happen to it without the drugs. I believe that heroin gives you super power because you just don't give a shit about anything, except the drug and how to get it. People do all different genius things and manipulate their ways to get it. My favorite works of Basquiat are from the downhill period. When drugs destroyed him, when he lost Andy, his mentor and realized how alone he was. It made him existential, without any façade of being cool. His last paintings have that violent fragility that I was talking about before. They are quiet and minimal. I can show you [shows the catalogue] the last paintings: a lot of empty space, the void. It's also oriented toward the center of the image. The center is the focus and in the center the figure alone is riding his death with a big nothing around him. In this Brooklyn Museum show, you could track down how he was getting ready to make his masterpieces and die. From that void of solitude, only death can pull you out. All the friends who are trying to help were just digging the hole deeper.

CH: I love what you say about how centered the image construction is, about the importance of the void, too.

RA: They are portraits.

CH: I like the different issues you talked about, it's full of exciting things and I am wondering where your plans lead to in the future? It all sounds like a very intense and productive time, so do you eventually want to take a break, for example?

RA: I can't imagine taking a break. There is nothing else for me to do but progress in my work. This is my non-stop vacation, working. Artists are the luckiest people on earth to be able to spend their time on what they love. And, there are times when a new energy comes and takes you even higher. At the moment, it is like that—taking the next level.

This interview between Rita Ackermann and Cathérine Hug took place in Rita Ackermann's studio in Brooklyn on February 22, 2010.

1 — Donald Judd (1928–94), US-American artist and founder of the Chinati Foundation.

2 — John Chamberlain (*1927), US-American Artist.

3 — Diego Velázquez, Spanish painter, 1599–1660.

4 — Jim Dine, American Pop Artist, *1935.

SWEET DANGER

RITA ACKERMANN'S UNSETTLING VISIONS

BY SCOTT INDRISEK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SLAVA MOGUTIN

In Rita Ackermann's world it's not uncommon to find a gaggle of scantily clad, high-cheekboned females - bearing a marked resemblance to the Hungarian-born artist herself - caught in a surreal disorientating tableaux. Rendered in two dimensions or as sculptural assemblages, the works are both challenging and approachable. Take *Toast For No Fear, Karslruhe 2007*, (2007), a multilayered wall piece that integrates

Ackerann's young ladies with classical silhouettes and weird symmetries. It looks as though several pages from the artist's sketchbook had been expanded and enlarged; the result is refreshingly vulnerable. Ackermann's earliest work celebrated this same rough-edged, collaged aesthetic, though her practice has grown immensely since the first pieces were shown at Andrea Rosen Gallery back in 1994 as part of the charmingly named solo show "After Dinner I'm Gonna Shoot You But Before I'll Take a Shower." *Should I Call the Ambulance?* (1994) is a classic early Ackermann work: a young girl in bra and panties, holding a telephone, dawdles next to a tiger; in the background, three mostly nude females warm themselves at a fire; a mysteriously outlined human hand encroaches on the right side of the frame, its owner unseen. The effect is unnerving - both idyllic and potentially violent, given the title - and owes much to the skewed fairy-tale style of Outsider pioneers like Henry Darger. (As we found out, however, that's a lineage that Ackermann is quick to disown.)

Since then, Ackermann has followed her visual, experimental cuiosity in pieces like *Nun/ Skeleton/Cross* (2006), a sculpture that combines found' religious imagery with her own nudes, wearing bowler hats. Her penchant for mixing sweet and sour is still strong; a 2006 sketch layers two dissonant images a demure woman in a short dress and what appears to be a fanged squirrel or fox, captured in a disturbing fauxnaive style - into a jarring optical illusion. Firecrotch (2008), another sculptural work from her most recent solo exhibition at Andrea Rosen, also juxtaposes the human with the animal, and a refined eye with a willfully childish informality. (Whether the title references a popular gossip euphemism for Lindsay Lohan remains to be seen.)

We spoke with Ackermann after a recent trip to Budapest, and di cussed how a lasting piece of work has the ability to "stab" as well as why a utopian art economy might mean trading a painting for a car.

WHITEWALL: *Where is your studio and how long have you been working there? What's a typical work day like for you? What is it about living and working in New York that inspires you (or infuriates you, ifthat's occasionally the case)?*

RITA ACKERMANN: My studio is on Pearl Street by the south ferry. A very old 10ft. I moved in the end of this summer from Chinatown. It's the very heart of the financial district, and it doesn't feel like a neighborhood. I still couldn't put my finger on it how it feels like and if it affects my work. It's isolating and keeps me locked up. It's quiet and it's very close - and far away at the same time. You can feel the city but also feel that you live outside of it. There is no typical workday for me. I have my hand in everything that I make from sketch to the finish, and I wish sometimes that I wouldn't be such a control freak. I can't even let someone else clean up my studio because I have to go through each piece of scrap and decide if it's garbage or not. That way a cleaning up becomes part of the work since it is decision making. Occasionally I have guilt trips that I'm wasting my time and should be able to ask my assistant, Marcel, to do things for me. He helps me with errands and computer work and keeps pleasant company. I also have a glamorous intern, Jannett, who helps me keep up with the tabloids and helps my daughter, Marika, do her art projects. It's really great when occasionally a sharp-eyed friend comes over and critiques the work. There are stages when I love to show what's happening in my studio; there are stages when I keep the door shut. That is usually when I start working on a new body of work. What inspires me about NewYork is that that you have to always reinvent yourself. The city moves so fast, and different generations can share so much and be open to each other instead of getting comfortable and becoming a vegetable on what you read in newspapers and what you see on TV. When I came here I couldn't believe this openness and the vast chances you get to make yourself be at your best. New York is great in this moment.

WW: *How does narrative play a role in your art?*

RA: I feel really lazy to track narrative down in my art. I know that it did playa role, and I don't think it does that much anymore. I like when writers try to solve these questions but then I get infuriated when it comes to be only a personal grouch, just wasting time. Nevertheless, it does happen when a written text could be synchronous with its subject; it's a blissful moment because it breaks the loneliness. I find it so fortunate when a constructive conversation emerges between an artist and a critic on the work. It makes me happy when my works get support by writing about it. It helps everybody. When Shamim Momin found some parallel between my work and some of Slavoj Zizek's essays, or Felix Ensslin pointed out that my work and my career should encourage the acceptance of "the not exactly trackable" and to always find new models above the existing ones, that was very helpful. I'll never forget the first review by Carl Freedman that made me realized that what I was doing from that point would be criticized. I entered a world where I was going to be not only in my self-contained universe if I want to survive.

WW: *Do you feel like your pieces have recurring characters or motifs that form a larger story, somewhat in the way that the work of Henry Darger created its own self-contained universe?*

Rita Ackermann
Blue Blooded Bourgeois Bitch
2008
Acrylic and oil paint, gel medium, charcoal, spray paint, and oil stick on canvas
86 x 68 x 3 1/8 inches
©RITA ACKERMANN
PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER BURKE
COURTESY OF ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Rita Ackermann
Firecrotch
2008
Plexiglas, yarn, printed paper, cardboard, tape, charcoal, spray paint, tempera, marker, stickers, and bolts
93 1/4 x 45 x 2 3/4 inches
©RITA ACKERMANN
PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER BURKE
COURTESY OF ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Rita Ackermann
In Da Shade
2008
Acrylic and oil paint, gel medium, spary paint, dirt, oil stick, printed paper, charcoal, and ink on canvas
78 x 85 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches
©RITA ACKERMANN
PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER BURKE
COURTESY OF ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

RA: If my work would had just stayed on that level of selfcontained universe - building a larger story with its own motifs and characters - I would probably have been making Japanese Suzuki commercials and rolling in the millions for video games. That was the first three years of my career, and it was rather naive and not manipulative at all. Therefore it could not live longer, since I'm not a feeble-minded Outsider artist, nor a commercial artist.

Darger was a naive artist, the same as Basquiat and others whose works were powerful and landed to "high art" from the streets. Darger's additional genius as an Outsider was his mental illness - plus he was long-dead by the time he got discovered. Basquiat had only eight years to create a massive career. What shows he was the greatest artist was that he developed his work and challenged himself consistently in such short time under the circumstances of fame and success. His work, like Rothko's, grabs me by the throat because I feel related to that sense of "loneliness of the long-distance runner," when you are totally alone on the road.

WW: *During a lecture at Miami Basel, Jerry Saltz seemed to suggest that the current economic crisis - which obviously affects the art market - might be goodfor emerging talent.*

RA: It's going to be the new generation of dealers and artists who will come up with some survival plans. The not-so-great will be weeded out, and quality will win over quantity. I sound like Peter Sellers's Gardener, but it's kind of a similar situation. Emergency gatherings for speculating the future is a tribal thing - critics can finally step up to a communal role of "the wise man." Suddenly I see the art world as utopian. Maybe it's going to be trading, and I can trade my paintings for a studio on the beach and a car. It's no joke - I'm serious.

WW: *As a female artist who concentrates, more often than not, on the female form, do you feel a critical responsibility to address gender?*

RA: I feel responsible to address any questions - to look for answers. Would you ask the same question from a male artist?

WW: *Very often youfocus on subjects who are oddly sexualized - and also, at least apparently, rather young. How do these two factors operate in your work - both youth and sexuality? Are they interrelated?*

RA: I guess it's always shocking when you see an old couple making out on a street bench. A young naked woman's or man's body, in our visual language, is an invitation to get closer. To step inside someone's world - not necessarily the person's who's being depicted. And that is how a communication can start: when someone steps inside and starts really looking around for why he or she got invited and what there is to be found. Sex is so abstract for me, same as sexual images, that when I use them I don't really even see the picture further than a form. That is a fact that I use women's bodies and sexuality in my work, but there are no psychological problems being addressed by their presence - I'm not using them or my art to work out my mental problems. In fact, I don't have any as far as I know, which is probably rare for an artist. Also, I can't say that I never did use sexual images to get attention in the beginning
of my career, but soon I recognized their quality as archetype. The figures of my recent paintings were built more on one collective archetype - the nurse - to simplify the figurative elements even more and use them as abstractly as possible. I believe that the simpler the work gets, the more directness it can deliver. If a piece stabs, then it's a good one and it will stay good in time.

WW: *What would you consider to be the pivotal piece from your most recent show at Andrea Rosen Gallery? How does it reflect your current aesthetic?*

RA: I had my four most favorite paintings in that show: *BlueBlooded Bitch, Ready to Fuck - Again, African Nurse,* and *In Da Shade*. They are accomplished and untouchable, and I just laugh when someone tries to fuck with them.

WW: *Do you feel any affinity with other artists who are also interrogating and working with the female form in figurative painting or drawing? I see certain parallels between your work an that of Marlene Dumas, for instance.*

RA: Artists inspire me regardless of their gender. In the past two months, I liked Richard Prince's "Canal Zone" at Gagosian Gallery, Joe Bradley's Schmagoo paintings at Canada Gallery, and Mary Heilmann's "To Be Someone" at the New Museum. I don't see very much affinity between my work and Dumas's. I like very much a self-portrait that she made very early in her career, and on that painting you can really see how she was developing her style that later became her signature technique. There are artists who develop a certain technique on a respectable level; that holds down their entire artistic practice. I'm rather interested in a constructive/destructive mechanism where I destroy the elements of the previous work in order to build a new one. The paste that holds these elements and works together is my style, and even if it changes time by time it has its core that orchestrates. Maybe this method of working explains why collage is important in my work.

WW: *What do you find exciting about collage - whether that's on paper, or used within a sculpture or assemblage?*

RA: That everything can be matched up, glued together, torn apart, and be fixed. There is no "impossible" in collage and bricolage. It gives a ground to practice style where accidents have ruling roles and automatism is very welcomed. It sharpens the eye to notice things and recognize perfection. Those subway ad collages around the city, by the way, the best ones I've ever seen in my life. And it's made by the people of the subways.

WW: *Where do you uncover images that inspire you?*

RA: Everywhere.

Rita Ackermann
Ready to Fuck - Again
2005 — 2008
Acrylic and oil paint, gel medium, dirt, sand, oil stick, and graphite on canvas
19 3/4 x 23 3/4 inches
©RITA ACKERMANN
PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER BURKE
COURTESY OF ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

ZURICH

"Marfa/Crash," Rita Ackermann's sixth exhibition at Galerie Peter Kilchmann, is the product of her recent residency at the Chinati Foundation, Donald Judd's home turned artist colony in Marfa, Texas, and through it we see whether, in the barren West Texas landscape, she was able to leave her cosmopolitan femininity behind. Ackermann did bring something with her to Marfa: Get a Job, a 1993 drawing of five women that appears in various permutations in the exhibition, most directly in Mothership, in which the original, crisp lines are reinvented as thick and urgent. Only three of the women appear here: one now masturbates; another has been reduced to a blue, alienlike head. Ackermann uses molding paste and tempera, and the pigment is lumped and cracked on the creased industrial canvas.

T hroughout her career, Ackermann has submitted her exotic-looking, perennially adolescent self-portraits to historical styles. The thick paint and high-impact brushstrokes here reference haute pâte, the term for Jean Dubuffet's use of muddy impasto as an organic tabula rasa after the trauma of World War II —which Ackermann reinterprets in a psychedelic, scorching, and quite feminine color palette.

For Ackermann, the ground is less a solid foundation than a place for constant damage and renewal. Vertical Horizon is one of three canvases propped on cinder blocks and leaned against the gallery's columns. The canvas is cut through the middle to reveal the support of the stretcher; she's cropped and collaged a crashed car, so that the damage to the car is erased and reenacted by her own cuts.

—AJ

WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE

The New York Times

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2008

Rita Ackermann

Don't Give Me Salad (Nurses)

Andrea Rosen
525 West 24th Street, Cheslea
Through Oct. 18

The works in Rita Ackermann's "Don't Give Me Salad (Nurses)" chew up and spit out the pulp-fiction female stereotypes embodied in Richard Prince's much-hyped "Nurse Paintings." (Ms. Ackermann makes no overt references to Mr. Prince's pictures, but the comparison is inevitable.) The women in her paintings, drawings and collages sometimes wear white caps, but their wide-set alien eyes, skinny, neon-tinged bodies and violent gestures convey anything but nurture.

As befits the downtown image she has honed for a decade and a half, Ms. Ackermann layers textiles, printed matter, spray paint, metal hardware and other materials with an aggressively urban sensibility. In "I Told You — Don't Give Me Salad" she draws over a police training poster of a gunman holding a woman hostage.

Several collages of composite figures, sandwiched between layers of glass, are among the show's most gripping works. The totemlike subject of "Firecrotch" (the title refers to a tabloid slur) has a catlike face, a head of shocking orange yarn and matching day-glo talons.

The paintings are more congested, Neo-Expressionist affairs, but the best ones — like the picture of a skeletal woman with long blue-black hair who raises her hand in a two-fingered salute — play Nurse Ratched to Mr. Prince's Florence Nightingales.

KAREN ROSENBERG

Art Review:

REVIEWS:
USA

Rita Ackermann — Andrea Rosen Gallery, NewYork
Don't Give Me Salad (Nurses) — 13 September -18 October

In Da Shade, 2008, mixed media, 198 x 216 cm. Courtesy the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Since Rita Ackermann arrived in New York from her native Hungary in the early 1990s, she has funnelled energy from the downtown art and performance scenes and given it back in everything from stained glass to animations to puppet theatres to goth art/rock (she currently rocks out in a band called Angelblood). Hers is a means and a milieu that encourages haste and gadabout efforts, and yet the best of Ackermann is her work as a painter and collagist, and on this - at least judging by the infrequency of her exhibitions - she seems to lavish time and deliberation.

The first paintings she exhibited, in the mid-90s, were built up with tumbling, street-tough nymphets, and layered in the manner of David Salle. In the years following, these figures calmed into creatures from Matisse-like Edenic idylls. And now, most oddly, they've suddenly become extremely angry. The characters that appear in her latest work are archetypes of healers who sicken - less erotically charged than Richard Prince's murderous nurses, perhaps, but more sharptaloned and violent. Many are reminiscent of the primitive figures that started to populate the canvases of Paris moderns a century ago: *African Nurse* (2005-8) is a curvaceous fetish with a piece of canvas cut away where an eye might appear. The mood is amped up with rage in works like *Firecrotch* (2008): the swollen, ovoid head is joined to a torso supplied by a black-and-white print of a pistol being drawn over the bonnet of a car; red wool lends an angry hairpiece; and all the elements are clamped between the large Plexiglas panels that are Ackermann's signature. But it is modulated by knowing comedy in works like *Babysitters* (2008), which presents itself as a two-part banner, with a faint, scumbled image of the head of a nurse appearing, maybe benignly but probably malignly, over a printed, cartoon-stylised scene of African tribespeople scurrying about outside their huts (*fear* those missionaries!).

Ackermann has said in the past that she takes sometimes three hours and sometimes three years over her paintings; neither seems like the right amount, and yet this disparity points to the different virtues of her work. There is thrusting haste in some of her imagery: ghostly rubbings-out often supply a sense of flurries of activity in the drawings included in her collages. And there is often an almighty paint-overload on her canvases. In *Blue Blooded Bourgeois Bitch* (2008) she appears to have altered the mouth and torso of the figure so often that she has had to settle for disguising the multiple changes as a long shaggy beard.

A picture like *In Da Shade* (2008) sums her up: it's a painterly victory snatched from the jaws of defeat: a huddle of barely discernible figures darkens the foreground in a dirty heap, a rainbow loops overhead and lacy onion domes dance in the background. It's a picture which somehow doesn't deserve to be nearly as good as it is.

Morgan Falconer

Rita Ackermann

If Hans Bellmer used geometric lines to break open a vortex of erotically charged horror or ambivalent arousal, Rita Ackermann uses her supremely skillful line to almost close it again. And if Henry Darger's Realms of the Unreal produces closure, the psychotic closure of a universe of absolute satisfaction-more precisely, a universe that forecloses desire-then the intimate, playful, yet still mysterious settings, postures, and groupings of Ackermann's cat-eyed, curvy, girl / woman figures re inviting to the viewer, even if the invitation is marred-or perhaps made more tantalizing-by a hint of initial knowledge not handed out to anyone not already party and partial to it. To change the scene, if the Neo-Expressionist stance of, for example, George Baselitz is fully charged with the gesture of the heroic artist-subject, then the early work of Ackermann, like Sameface or Teenaurora (both 1997), only charges itself with the burden of sincerity, for it uses the gesture of expression that nevertheless a l most withdraws with its own execution.

Thanks to this kind of work, Ackermann has been highly influential as one of the central figures defining a moment that might be described as post-identity politics. However it is at the same time also beyond the irony which was, ironically, the reaction to identity politics in the art world. While artists like John Currin or Lisa Yuskovage also revived the representation of the female body as an object of desire, they did so by drawing on the 1950s American pin-up tradition and on the fetishism of an academic practice. Ackermann also restored the desire of women, both objective and subjective, to the forefront of the practice of contemporary art, but more by following in the footsteps of literature, fairy tales, and mythology, as well as the hidden history of the siren's call. To put it more precisely, she navigates in myriad ways-as performer, persona (or, rather, plural personae), as musician and collaborator, as individual and collective element, as painter and producer of installations, video, or wall-drawings-exactly within the split opened up by the objective and subjective reading of "x of woman." It is here, then, where the lines almost closing off the erotic abject, the expressive gesture almost withholding itself, and the invitation which is almost withdrawn become situated. The "almost" in each case signifies the gap between being subject and being object, as it is negotiated by Ackermann through the museums of the world as much as through the

Solo exhibitions

2006 Court Toujours, Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich
2005 Collage 1993-2005, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
Jump on me, Kunstverein Bonn,Germany Listen To The Fools Reapproach, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
2003 Ordogok(Devils), GalerieAlmine Rech, Paris 2002 Snowfall in August, Museum Het Domein, Sittard, The Netherlands

Group exhibitions

2006 Dereconstruction, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York
While Interwoven Echoes Drip into a Hybrid Body, Migros Museum, Zurich
2005 Concrete Castle, Confort Moderne, Poitiers, France
2004 Heavenly Creatures, Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria
2003 Anti Pure, Neue Kunsthalle St. Gallen, Switzerla nd

Publications

Rita Ackermann, "The Feast of the Beast," in: Purple Fashion Magazine, no. 4 (Fall/Winter 2006).
Raphael Gygax, "Chapter 3, Rita Ackermann, Andro Wekua," in: Kult, no. 5724 (April 2005).
Mario Sorrenti, "She created darkness, so she could shine," in: V Magazine, no. 21 (January/February 2003).
Mike Mei re, Statements (six):

contemporary life of signs and signifiers with which she incessantly seeks contact by adding to its content.
It follows that, in looking at the potentially confusing multiplicity of her endeavors and incarnations, it does not make sense to ask: "Will the real Rita Ackermann please stand up?" Rather, it is important to follow her trajectory as she stands up to her own Real, the Real of her situated ness and the conditions of her production. When, as with Toast for No Fear (2004) in Paris or with You Knocked the Salt Over (2004) in Salzburg, Ackermann invites us into a world, which should never be simply called "hers:' by way of an installation, we are confronted with strategies of readability and opacity that each inform each other, leaving us to respond, to show ourselves, to show responsibility. Again, the easy lines of the female figure seem to invite thoroughly, or even more, to let us nod in understanding, but we soon stop nodding. The shadowy emanations behind and next to the figure or figures seem to ask whose darkness is prevailing on this scene. To get next to the figures, we literally have to turn a corner only to witness baroque signifiers of vanitas, which are, uncannily, glad in vanity themselves. Elements like middle-class potted plants or an animal hide signifying both aristocratic privilege and cheesy, faux adaptations of it, add to the pieces of the puzzle. One might think, then, of Kathleen Hannah's editorial for the fanzine Jigsaw: "We live in a world that tells us we must choose an identity a career a relationship and commit...to these situations...as if we know what's gonna happen tomorrow, as if we aren't ever gonna change, as if we don't live in a world of constant flux..., which we do." Ackermann shows us this world. Beyond irony, she opens up sincerity by means of playfulness. In doing so, she reminds herself and us, even seduces us into reminding ourselves, that the subjects of this world and it's fantasies are nowhere to be found but with us. **FE**

Rita Ackermann, Mark Borthwick, Nicola Tyson; A project by Dornbracht (Iserlohn, 2002).
Arnold Mosselman, "Angelblood," in: Metropolis M, no.6 (December/January 2000/2001).

December 2005

ARTFORUM

BEST OF 2005

Matthew Higgs

A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTFORUM, MATTHEW HIGGS IS THE DIRECTOR AND CHIEF CURATOR AT WHITE COLUMNS, NEW YORK.

1 "ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: HOAR-FROSTS" (GUILD HALL, EAST HAMPTON, NY) The saddest summer show ever? Given that institutions tend to roll out holiday favorites or crowd pleasers for the summer season, the Guild Hall's decision to exhibit Rauschenberg's little known, rarely seen, and profoundly melancholic "Hoarfrost" series was a bold gesture. Haning like "ghosts" in the air-conditioned chill of the museum's elegant rooms, the 1974-75 "Hoarfrosts"-unstretched fabric "paintings" constructed from layers of transparent, translucent, and opaque materials-were so aesthetically subdued that they barely registered on the eye, but somehow, miraculously, they left a nagging, indefinable impression that persists to this day.

2 ROBERT BECHTLE (SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART) This retrospective, brilliantly organized by SF MOMA'S Janet Bishop, was, at least to my nonAmerican eyes, a complete revelation. Almost Proustian in its downbeatness, Bechtle's work seems to have been devoted to recording his personal discomfort with the world around him. From the emotionallystrained paintings of the 1960s and '70s (often derived from family snapshots) to the deserted streets depicted in recent paintings of his San Francisco neighborhood, Bechtle's reclusive art describes a psychogeography profoundly at odds with the socially progressive, utopian narratives typically associated with his northem Californian home.

3 LUCAS SAMARAS: PHOTOFLICKS (iMOVIES) AND PHOTOFICTIONS (A TO Z) (PACEWILDENSTEIN, NEW YORK) Like Bechtle, Lucas Samaras focuses on issues close to home: namely, himself. PhotoFlicks (iMovies), 2004-2005-sixty short, digitally generated "movies," each "starring" Samaras-was his first engagement with the moving image since his appositely titled 1969 film Self{made with Kim Levin). The installation itself was, like Samaras's entire project, a radical gesture. The movies, and an additional four thousand digital photographic images-PhotoRctions (A to Z), 2004-2005-were displayed on thirty-five Apple workstations, which allowed the viewer to independently navigate the works on screen and transformed the vast gallery space into a surrogate "classroom" dedicated to the study of its sole subject: Lucas Samaras.

4 RITA ACKERMANN, "COLLAGE 1993-2005" (ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY, NEW YORK) Overheard on West Twenty-fourth Street outside Rita Ackermann's exhibition: WOMAN: "What's in there?" MAN: "Junky collages." "Junky" aesthetics or not, this wonderfully focused exhibition barely scratched the surface, only hinting at the larger ambition of this mercurial artist's kaleidoscopic output (which embraces art, music, writing, fashion, and curatorial projects). Ackermann remains defiantly against the grain and ahead of the curve. Athorough survey of her work would allow us all an opportunity to catch up.

51SA GENZKEN (DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK) It is hard not to imagine Isa Genzken's recent works-precariously assembled from just about anything: action figures, furniture, plastic flowers, sections of an aircraft fuselage, umbrellas, adhesive tape, paint-literally falling apart.
This built-in sense of imminent collapse lends the work a genuine sense offoreboding, and, with the "onearmed bandit" that sat mysteriously on the gallery's floor, Genzken seems to suggest that art, like life, is ultimately a gamble.

6 PETER HUJAR, "NIGHT" (MATIHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK) American audiences appear to have an insatiable appetite for looking at photographs of other Americans. This past year, New York alone saw substantial shows from noted "people watchers" such as Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, William Eggleston, Larry Clark, and Bill Owens. More provocative, though, was an exhibition of mostly never-before-seen nocturnal photographs by Peter Hujar (1934-1987). Invariably positioned somewhere between Arbus and Robert Mapplethorpe, Hujar is, for me, the more compelling (and ultimately more complicated) artist. A perfectionist who trained his lens on an imperfect world, Hujar deserves greater acknowledgment for his extraordinary vision. (I'm sure that curator Bob Nickas's current Hujar survey at New York's P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center wili go some distance in rectifying this situation.)

7 KAY ROSEN (GRAY KAPERNEKAS GALLERY, NEW YORK) Though she has been showing for nearly thirty years Kay Rosen is constantly pegged as one of the art world's "best kept secrets" (a sobriquet I'm not sure she would necessarily appreciate). Someday I hope to see a space the size of Dia:Beacon filled with her sly, brainy, poetic works, but in the meantime I'll have to make do with her recent exquisite exhibition at this small and highly promising new gallery in Chelsea.

8 ROBERT BARDO, "ANOTHER DAY" (ALEXANDER AND BONIN, NEW YORK) Seemingly effortless, as if conjured from almost nothing-a smear of paint here, a blob of paint there-Robert Bardo's deceptively ambitious recent paintings, like all great art, encouraged me to think of other artists: such as Rene Daniels, Thomas Nozkowski, Raoul de Keyser, and Mary Heilmann (whose own solo show at New York's 303 Gallery was another 2005 gem).

9 "LOG CABIN" (ARTISTS SPACE, NEW YORK) "Log Cabin" was a wildly ambitious if occasionally unfocused group show that stood out primarily as a brave attempt, by curator Jeffrey Uslip, to stake out some original (curatorial) territory, seeking as it did-according to the press release-to "examine the impact of neoconservatism on queer representations in America." The fact that "Log Cabin" wasn't entirely successful in articulating this condition might be a cause for concern, but I'm convinced that as a provocation, the exhibition-which I've already heard colloquially referred to as the "Gay Show" and which featured contributions from more than thirty artists including Cass Bird, AA Bronson, K8 Hardy, Jonathan Horowitz, Monica Majoli, Dean Sameshima, Scott Treleaven, and Kelley Walker-might, with the advantage of hindsight, be considered a landmark event in years to come.

10 JONATHAN HOROWITZ, "THE NEW COMMUNISM" (GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE, NEW YORK) Horowitz's "New Communism" succeeded in its stated aim of spreading "a light dusting of style" on the tired arena of American party politics. A new design for the Stars and Stripes; a memorial sculpture of the World Trade Center created from stacks of recycled newspapers; the artist's ecofriendly Prius placed on a pedestal (with a SUPPORT THEIR TROOPS sticker attached); and dealer Gavin Brown's promise to personally answer all calls to the gallery for the show's duration combined to create some of the sassiest and most satisfying political art in recent memory.

frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture
Issue 95 November - December 2005

Andrea Gallery, New York, USA

Recently I was reading a second-hand book. Some pages were heavily marked with an intricate system of crosses, dots and underlinings; others were bare. As I went along, I became increasingly aware that other eyes had graced these pages, that my attention was as often cued by the interpretations ofmy predecessor as theywere by my own reading.

I had a similar sensation at Rita Ackermann's recent exhibition of collages. In many ways this feeling of double-vision is implicit in such art: composite by nature, collages are accumulations of found images, words and objects whose meanings are shifted by the placement and juxtaposition given to them by the artist. In looking at a collage, the viewer is necessarily drawn into the act of their making; as one attempts to decode and decipher, the irrefutable act of selection is brought to the fore. Spanning 13 years, this mini-retrospective offered multiple opportunities to creep inside the mind of this insightful, sexy and politically attuned female artist, known for casting a wide artistic net. Painter, draftsman, musician and performer, Ackermann has always incorporated a variety of media, frequently in collaboration with other artists. But collage is in many ways the most expressive and organic way to bring together her myriad interests.

The works were installed in chronologically linked clusters, with one large wall drawing, Cross (2005), forming the backdrop to groups of collages and enhancing the sensation that the gallery was structured like an assemblage. Ackermann's earliest works are generally spare, flat and focused, but she seems to have grown more audacious with the passing years. Clipped texts lifted from the New rork Times often provide a guiding theme, as in *But He Still Isn't Happy* (1994), which depicts several of the artist's nymphets (seen regularly in paintings of the early to mid-1990s) with newspaper copy 'bubbles' about 'bustbooster' bras, weddings and the like. In the foreground a young woman is depicted with downcast eyes and legs akimbo, the work's deadpan title floating beside her head.

Six substantial pieces from 1996 were based on Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi (King Ubu, 1896), the notoriously Absurdist play championed by the Surrealists and Dadaists for its grotesque depictions of modern life. Ackermann's vivid explorations ofJarry's scatology, with predominantly monoc1l-rome compositions that range from muddy browns to garish fuchsias, bind text, image and paint into visual explosions that mark a turningpoint in her exploration of a medium in which she can tackle wider historical and societal issues head-on. Later compositions are heady and complicated, infused with colour and rife with layered references. Further, Ackermann demonstrates her love for riotous exhibitionism and theatrical behaviour, suggesting that she uses collages to cut, paste and rearrange perceptions and cultural assumptions.

In the various versions of With No Roots Behind Them (1997 and 1998) Ackermann returned to the theme of adolescence, but with even less inhibition and fewer pretty finishes. Snoop stickers spouting pithy truisms such as 'you're a winner' pair with magazine cut-outs of preening mo els turned awkwardly pubescent by the artist's graffiti-like alterations (frizzy hair and Coke-bottle eye-glasses). Nearby was 'Levitation of the Strong American Woman', a series from 2001 in which mail-order catalogue models lie directly on top of her own daughter's drawings on sugar paper.

The juxtaposition demonstrates a sudden shift from adolescence to womanhood and the attendant anxiety of the female teen morphing into the constrained uniformity of the casually business-attired adult, while addressing the wider question of how one defines individuality against the tide ofconsumables. It reveals a particularly intimate side ofAckermann, providing an alternative to the brash, sassy alter egos of the early paintings, and suggests that collage is a private tool for moving from one creative stage to the next.

In Ackermann's world men are felt mainly by their absence, rendered via the particular female experiences - including neurosis, compulsion and ridicule - that mirror how women are perceived by men. One fantastic work, Rabbit, the Clown (2000), illustrates their place in her cosmos: out of the back of a clown cumcowboy protrudes the ass of a'bull, head turned towards the viewer, all yearning and doe-eyed. Simultaneously the saviour and the sap, he is ultimately just the buffoonish stud. Rendered directly onto a saccharine rainbow poster (bought at a hobby shop), the work comes from a series done in Texas, where kitschy country culture finds its muse. Kim Gordon compared Ackermann's escape from the suffocating New York art world to Paul Gauguin's years in Tahiti (the Post-Impressionist's women, incidentally, find their way into one collage), and it is true there is a quality of uninhibited freedom, accessible to the distanced vantage point of the outsider, that she translates into richly alluring and sometimes horrific compositions. What is evident from the most recent work - a pair of lurid fluorescent silhouettes referencing the capricious Leigh Bowery - is that Ackermann continues to play in the shadows and to delight in new visual spaces.

Katie Stone Sonnenborn

Rita Ackermann With No Boots Behind Them I
1997, Collage on paper
25 x 18 cm

Rita Ackermann

The New York Times

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2005

Art in Review

Rita Ackermann
Francis Upritchard

Andrea Rosen Gallery
525 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Ackermann through Oct. 15;
Upritchard through tomorrow

A survey of 44 large and small works spanning a dozen years suggests that Rita Ackermann's restless exploration of collage and drawing is consistently subversive and energetic, if not always markedly original. It also confirms the artist as an important precedent for the current craze for paper, as well as for depictions of childhood and adolescence.

Ms. Ackermann is equally at home with scissors or ballpoint pen; with finely rendered figures and poetic phrases or words and images clipped from newspapers and magazines; and with clogged compositions or spare ones. Women — as victors, victims or silent witnesses — appear in all situations. Especially impressive is "World War III Around My Skull," a canvas whose collage-like layering of images from popular culture bearing down on a hollow figure are vigorously executed in red and blue ballpoint over paint. Recent collages involving bright construction paper show promise.

In the second gallery, the London-based New Zealand artist Francis Upritchard makes her New York debut with a series of wry simulacra of old sculptures and objects: ceramic lamps with faces, small vessels in hand-blown black-spotted glass; gnarly copies of blue and white Wedgwood jasperware, and some wizened, strangely warped figures around 18 inches high. Made of a natural latex called balata, these figures might be statues of Greek athletes, but they also resemble recently excavated bodies.

ROBERTA SMITH

ARTFORUM

MARCH 2004 PG183

Rita Ackermann, *Shaman*, 2003, oil on board, 24 x 18".

RITA ACKERMANN

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Rita Ackermann is a painter who tends to put that talent in the service of a wider, more adventurous milieu-making activity, connecting with music, fashion, and other urban scenes in order to carry sensations from one place over into another, sometimes making us rediscover what painting is along the way. One example is *The Deer Slayer*, the shadow-puppet theater she produced in 1997. With live narration by Kim Gordon and music by members of the No Neck Blues Band, the show—combining painting and performance, improvised sound plus changing backdrops and the illuminated figures that moved across them—seemed to be making up a strange new language on the spot. Other memorable moments include performances by her band Angelblood, her stained-glass windows at the bar Max Fish and the New Museum, an early CD-ROM animation about a lonely girl in a bathroom, and the schizo makeup she once styled for a fashion shoot using only a red ballpoint pen. Now and then there is a gallery show, and as gallery shows these hit or miss. But with "Listen to the Fool's Reproach," an exhibition of fourteen new oil paintings, Ackermann comes as close as ever to the intensified, art-as-good-as-drugs experience of her other, extramural activities.

A cycle of small-scale works, all painted on wood panels, ringed the room in one even row. Making various references to sources both literary (Norse mythology, Shakespeare, the Brothers Grimm, etc.) and autobiographical, Ackermann—like Fuseli or Blake (from whom she takes the show's title)—opens up a sort of Northwest Passage between reading and painting where something very concentrated and personal is made to happen. It is not a simple question here of picturing stories but of how each painting enacts the moment of entry as a literary or mental image is actualized in the precise speeds and temperatures of paint. Presiding over this magic are Ackermann's familiar figures with their cat eyes and small breasts—feral, pubescent quasi self-portraits reminiscent of Darger's Vivian girls. The air blows, burns, and blooms around them: a sentimental sunset smeared on with a knife, an orange bonfire erupting in Actionist impasto, an inexplicably derailed brushstroke slicing the gray green of a room where two girls slump at a table. Furniture takes on a fleshy urgency when six or eight stabs of color converge as one nervous table leg. And, depending on the scene, the girls' flesh is sometimes corpse blue in a polished piano's reflection, clotted and dull in the cloister of a hospital waiting room, or Shiseido smooth in the case of one spectacular ass that spreads the canvas with its pristine pallor. If the girls' bodies seem pulled out of rivers, flames, or fairy tales, the scenes they inhabit are occasions for collaging Goya disasters with Manet hats, Munch forests with Asger Jorn freakouts. A single painting is worked fast and slow, thin and thick, opening itself to a multiplicity of effects that matches the diversity of tales being told even in one image.

Ackermann has been showing for over a decade, continually putting painting into variation with other nonpainterly perceptions and sensations. Once again, her new work has the freshness, crafty intuition, and stylistic uninhibitedness of an upstart—seeming to suddenly come back into phase with a moment she set the tone for back when kids were buying her drawings on album covers and T-shirts.

—John Kelsey

the village VOICE
January 27, 1998
Vol. XLII No. 4

The Young One

Rita Ackermann

Andrea Rosen Gallery
30 Prince Street
Through February 7

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

I felt at sea with this show of racy, moody, at times startlingly David Salle-ish paintings that are very refreshing and seem peculiarly up-to-the-minure, so I phoned the painter. She is Rita Ackermann, a Hungarian 29 years old and six years in New York. She stands high among new artists who are rejuvenating in the old game of pigments on canvas. She told me that she derives major inspiration from Downtown music and performance scenes, in which she participates as a sometimes singer-puppeteer. I was afraid of that.

Is it just me, or is this city more epically crowded than at any time since glass-plate photography of immigrants-choked Delancey Street? At least in my neighborhood, the sidewalk-obliterating mobs are scarily youthful and alert looking and are up to stuff that I'll never know about because at my age it happens past my bedtime. I mentioned to Ackermann that I don't keep up with new music, and she said, "Oh", compassionately. What could we even talk about?

Paint. A one of a kind five foot tall acrylic head in the show, Angryboy, has a frantic, unapologetically early-1980s, neo-Bad Painting look, though with densely lovely colors-grabby greens and a strange red-that slow it way down. Ackermann said she made it in one three hour go while listening to a recorded heavy-metal rock featuring her husband, a musician from Corpus Christi, Texas. Uh-huh. I was happier learning about the colors: cadmium green light, a couple of other greens, and a crucial bluish green that she couldn't name because she had used up and discarded the tube. The red is mixed gold and copper. As often in Ackermann's work, the paint was applied and moved around largely with her fingers.

The generic-with-a-difference Angryboy typifies a fledgling career that has already notched several distinct manners, Ackermann is a magpie stylist, a chameleon, even a sort of painting impersonator on themes of adolescent joy, pain, and effrontery. Her work is often must striking precisely where it most closely resembles something we have seen before. The Salle reminiscences in some of the pictures here—laconic overlay drawing, paint handling as an image of itself, congested texture and irritable color-suggest formal influence less than vernacular infection, like a funny accent you can't stop talking in until, eventually, your are bored with it.

Ackermann made her first splash in 1994 with paintings like big, colored-in sketchbook pages of sinisterly sweet, nymphetish girls in underwear who look like each other and I'm told, like her. It was as if Henry Darger darlings grew up a bit and vamped Ingres harem scenes in the mode of brightly simplified Matisse bathers. Something like that. There was also a hint of Sue Williams's sexual abuse carnivals, only a lot more demure. I well believe what I've heard: this Ackermann flavor has a panting fetish following, notably in Japan, that reacted with anguish when, for her last show, she made Eric Fischl-like paintings from old snapshots of her little brother, touchingly lonesome looking in outdoor settings.

detail of: "Ladies Deserve to be Slaves...", 1997

Always with Ackermann, there is a sense of lively, shared artistic lingos that are in the air. They perch on her hand, then fly away. Some of them, hardly hip in themselves, may be in the air because she put them there, such as a charge of the ponderous German Georg Baselitz either way with paint. Her ventriloquy declares personal motives: first wanting to fashion a negotiable persona for herself as an ambitious young artist in an alien land, then needing to renew emotion al roots of a homesick soul. This is a common sort of artist's story. Compelling about Ackermann is the unusual nakedness of her quest, which amounts to a coming of age in public. I am just unclear about who and what the operative public might be.

My reliably plugged=in friend, the critic Jerry Saltz, assures me (on the phone, my lifeline to the world) that this public regards the various styles of early -'80s New-Expressionism-phenomena that still seem to me scandalous, for better and worse-as accomplished facts in the settled cultural landscape. Thus painting tropes that once reeked of malicious audacity, as with Salle, become purely matter-of-fact in the working of rising generational heroes like Ackermann. Irony is out. Humor is in. Sincerity is a given and no big deal. There is a remarkable absence-a vacuum, almost-of discernible attitude (How am I doing kids?)

Take Teenaurora, my favorite painting in this show. Unlike *Angryboy*, a labor of weeks Ackermann assured me, it includes in its' compacted imagery the battleship *Potemkin*, stenciled words of 1968 Parisian agiprop, a Russian religious procession in the snow, a 1940s satirical photo of content forbidden in Hollywood movies (a sexy drunk woman shooting a policeman), a hand making the V sign, and overlaid sketches of Frank Sinatra and his abjectly adoring son. The identity of these subjects, which mostly you wouldn't know if you weren't told, doesn't matter much, but their specificity does. Each comes with an ineffable guarantee of personal significance.

Ackermann said that the content of Teenaurora was suggested by the day she started painting it: November 7, anniversary of the Russian Revolution. She remembers celebrating that holiday in Budapest enthusiastically as a child and then, as a teenager, derisively. The picture is a palimpsest of revolts and revulsions, perhaps. It works by generating a dense, palpably inspired visual sensation that stands for density and inspiration of thought and feeling without communicating anything in particular. It commands attention.

Another painting, *Same-face*, accumulates efforts in different styles and techniques to get right the ambiguous expression of a woman in a photograph that haunted Ackermann. In a field of clots and washes of paint, the efforts all failed, she said, but then she succeeded at last with a few big, quick strokes that unify the canvas. It's true. The ultimate, floating, cartooned face is breathtakingly eloquent. Also finishing the picture is a finger-painted floral burst, which in Ackermann's lexicon seems a sign that grueling work has given way to happy pride—as if to say, "Look, I'm a real painting!"

It is sheer common sense to let oneself be charmed by Ackermann, albeit gingerly as befits her work's tentative, mixed signals. This remains tyro stuff. It is worth discussing because of the artist's spectacular skill and resourcefulness and because youthful flux is her subject as well as her condition. But the only sure thing may be that her art will yet again become quite different quite soon. Meanwhile, the experience goes to prove, as many things do these days, and as one might have said in my day, that something is happening and I don't know what it is. Signed, Mister Jones.

The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1996

Rita Ackermann

Andrea Rosen Gallery
130 Prince Street, SoHo
Through Feb. 24

Rita Ackermann is one of several young painters at work on a new blend of the abstract and real, flavored with large pinches of historical and political consciousness. (Fellow chefs include John Currin, Catherine Howe, Karen Kalimnik, Peter Doig and Lisa Yuskavage.) In her second show, Ms. Ackermann gets credit for moving on in terms of imagery. She has abandoned her clusters of sloe-eyed prepubescent girls - vaguely reminiscent of fashion illustration and of the artist herseIf - who had occupied landscapes defined by abstract clouds of paint.

Replacing them is a lone young boy in a plaid shirt and Windbreaker, clearly taken from a snapshot. In painting after painting, he appears in various Alpine settings, robustly finger-painted in subdued browns and grays with an occasional touch of orange or white that suggest sendupsof Abstract Expressionism. He brandishes a stick in "I Can Tame the Savage... . ," tosses a snowball in " ... And I Can Walk on Fire" and sits head in hands beneath a ski-lift in " ... But I Know I'll Never be a Good Skier."

After looking at Ms. Ackermann's deftly worked backgrounds, one is inclined to substitute the word "painter" for "skier" in that last title, to see the young boy as a substitute for the artist and the series as a rather wry allegory about the immense challenges faced by female painters. These works lack the visual edge of Ms. Ackermann's debut and, except when her colors brighten a bit, seem stultified by the conventions she - seeks to recycle. Still, she seems in tent on bringing several of painting's rich possibilities into play at once, and it will be interesting to see how the next chapter unfolds.

ROBERTA SMITH