

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

Review™

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Seeing *is* Believing

By **Dominique Nahas**

THE SUBJECT: MAGIC. IT'S IN THE AIR. I'VE BEEN PICKING up a lot of signs lately indicating that there's a revived interest in the art of illusion in the artworld. Reading the October 9th *New York Times* editorial "Honorable Fatigue" on Jane Alexander's resignation as chairman of the NEA at the end of this month after four years of wrangling with political opportunists of the likes of pinhead conservatives Dick Arney and Tom DeLay (way to go, Texas!) made me realize the NEA's slow, four-year demise under Alexander's watch was a phenomenon akin to Magic: an extraordinary social agency slowly disappearing into mid-air right in front of our eyes.

Fortunately, the topic of magic is in the air elsewhere in the art world these days, and not the purely gloomy type. The idea of disappearance/reappearance (or the illusion of such) is, of course, one of the underpinnings of what makes magic so pervasive, so much fun. The laws of logic, of rationality, the laws of physics that tether all of us to planet Earth are, presto, dispensed with. And we, of course, want to believe.

At the root of our belief in the sorcerer's/magician's power is the desire to believe in the power of transformation, metamorphosis, change, mutability. The absolute conviction that something, some "other," perhaps mystical power, beyond all of us can change our lives, even for a short amount of time; a fraction of a second will suffice in order to suspend disbelief. At the root of this is the notion of transformation and the power of the imagination — the resting place for art and magic.

Magic as the source of wonder and delight has always had a considerable pull in the art world, witness the Surrealists' implications in their works of the power of the imponderable: a floating mountain in the form of a bird, or a fur-lined teacup appear as matters-of-fact plucked out of a collective dream.

Consider the gossamer brush strokes, the mirrored illusionism, the play of glances, the inferred spaces in Velazquez's *LAS MENINAS*. Now, *that's* magic. How about Hans Hofmann's mirthfully

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eye-beguiling push-pull in *THE CONJURER, 1959?* Witness the disappearance of Rauschenberg's late fifties *THE MAGICIAN* painting which is nowhere to be seen in either of the three venues of the Guggenheim, nor was it reproduced in the massive catalogue.

Or, less mischievously, we can bring to mind Robert Barry's *TELEPATHIC PIECE, 1969*, where mental space communicated to the viewer is the space where "art" is manifested. Or Bruce Nauman's 1993 video *FALLS, PRATFALLS, AND SLEIGHTS OF HAND* where the realm of magic yields analogies to art making's use of mental impressions within conceptual/perceptual fields. And Joan Jonas' use of fairy tales and magic in her performances where optical principles of magic are used as a tool for perception.

I never thought I'd be actually reviewing magic shows, but on September 12th in SoHo *Magic: Up Close*, a set of three superbly realized acts by Jamylan Swiss, Mark Mitton and Peter Samelson at the McEnroe Gallery co-presented by the Downtown Arts Festival and curated by Helen Varola set me thinking. Thinking hard (which is in itself a neat trick, thanks to Varola's efforts that night, which were considerable). Varola's intentions were two-fold. First, this respected curator wants to affirm the analogy between the "honesty", the integrity of magic (or illusionism) and that of art-making. After all, as Jamy Ian Swiss made clear in his patter that evening, the magician is open about his intentions. S/he doesn't have bad-faith cards up his sleeve: s/he *intends* to trick you, s/he *intends* to deceive you. And you know it. The more the magician deceives you, the more "honest" the rapport becomes (and the better the act is.) "Magic is conceptual art that bridges the verbal and the visual and creates illusions to question the language used to deliver art from the deception wrought by images", Varola states. Secondly, she wants it to be known that she intends to re-establish the classic art of illusionism as it was classically and elegantly presented in the pre-New-Media 30s, 40s and 50s magic nightclubs in major urban centers. Magic, she asserts, (quite correctly) is to be seen and appreciated as part of performance art and should be given parity with other performance art. The series of performances at the McEnroe Gallery, hopefully, will set the ball rolling for Varola's planned series of ongoing public magic events in restaurants and galleries in SoHo or Chelsea in the near

future, as well as in museums in this country and abroad.

The community of magicians is insular and close-knit. Most of these performers are superb public story tellers and, as artists, discipline themselves (there are no formal magic schools!) to present visual information seamlessly, often spending years to perfect techniques involving slight-of-hand movements which are over in the space of seconds on stage. As in painting, say, which often consists of undercoats of activities to create spatial illusions that come together on the surface of the work, magical performers bone up on their knowledge of revealed front views and concealed backviews, and depend on the audience's misdirected assumption about such symmetric reliability.

This is, of course, what makes magic. *Magic: Up Close* had aspects which made it indistinguishable (or was I fooled?) from fine art and performance art: the timing, the language, the movement within these stage acts were breathtakingly thrilling to experience. (I still see in my mind's eye Peter Samelson's classic close-up magic routine of blowing smoke through a straw into a glass goblet, its vapors covering the coin inside of it and the hushed silence that followed the curls of wispy smoke resting in the container.) The closeness, the clarity, the intimacy of the movements and the talk brought the whole room together and proved Varola's point that magic is seductive because it is interactive; binds people together in a social event. Magic is participatory performance art.

Magic: *Close Up*, then, was no ordinary entertainment for it offered the 200-plus art audience a chance to see magic as something special, outside the bounds of Las Vegas entertainment, outside of the bounds of clumsy amateurism. The evening began with a slide history of the ancient art of magic and its ancient roots (the word comes from the word *magi* – Persian priests whose practices were labeled magic (*mageia*) by the Greeks.) Magic's associations are wide-ranging: Sir J.G. Frazer believed magic to be a preliminary stage in the development of religion and its associations with alchemy link it tangentially with the beginnings of science. Yet of course the link between magic (which Frazer equated with compulsion) and religion (which he equated with propitiation) brings us very close to the orbit of artmaking's intention which is transformative in essence. Add to this the notion of illusionism, and the suspension of disbelief, and you find some of the same attributes and symptoms of art-making itself.

Primitive magic was used to ward off ill-luck, as the first cave men, undoubtedly realized as they painted the first apotropaic images on cavern walls. It was also used to entice and seduce good spirits to congregate and protect the community. Modern magic re-instills a sense of wonder and amazement at the finessed skills possessed by the performer. Such skills are used, (as they were in *Magic: Up Close*) optimally, to bring up abstract ideas and questions of infinity and relativity in the mind of the viewer – notions enfolded into the conditional aspects of performance-duration, distance, location and the subjective experience. “Magic”, writes Jamy Ian Swiss with Edward Tufte in *Visual Explanations* (Graphic Press, 1997), “is the production of entertaining illusions, has an appeal quite independent of the local specifics of language or culture. In seemingly causing an object to vanish or an assistant to levitate, conjurers amaze, delight, and even shock their audiences by the apparent violation of the universal laws of nature and our daily experience of those laws. Since these principles of physics hold everywhere, magic is conceivably a cosmological entertainment . . . regardless of planetary system.” One might add to this the important point that magic is participatory performance, and should be included in the repertoire of performance art.

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In SoHo this week, two exhibitions made me respond to magic’s siren call.

IN MICHÈLE BLONDEL’S *LA DAME À LA LICORNE* (*Lady with a Unicorn*) at Elga Wimmer, sixty-or-so elements strewn on the floor of the gallery and hung on walls depict the remnants of love battles won and lost between mermaids and unicorns. The heavy glass elements arranged sparingly on the floor in the main room to create a fragmentary and discursive eroticized accounts of narrative of chase, flight, dispersal. Made of Baccarat and Vianne crystal in blood red, amber and light sea-green as well as opal white, all hand blown by the artist, create an inebriated atmosphere of opulence, decadence, and seduction which celebrates the senses.

At Wimmer, the air in the gallery is rarefied, filled with whiffs of a dream world from another time: a passionate mythology about sacrifice, woundedness, containment of fury and passionate release. The artist’s dispersed inventory of fragmentary evocative objects (body-armor, amulets, dildo-fetishes, chalices, amphorae, lances, fish parts, unicorn horns, narwhal tusks, vagina-shells) are displayed in an opulent, dream-like

environment where evocations of love battles lost or sustained use the translucency of her objects, and their placement, to suggest flight, devotion, withdrawal, conquest. Violence and tenderness come together in an eroticized context. This seemingly simple exhibition is tenderly and beautifully crafted to wring the highest possible emotion from the viewer. It is an unalloyed delight.

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THE CURRENT LENNON WEINBERG EXHIBITION *Robin Hill: Sculpture and Drawing* is a surprisingly subtle and moving exhibition by an artist who has a deep, almost mystical, rapport and reverence for materials. This singular connection with substances is intimated through the titles of her works.

Ostensibly related to cook-book instructions, these incantatory, mundane phrases seemed to me to be the musings of a modern-day alchemist hard at work and concentrating evenly and slowly to transubstantiate base materials (*prima materia*) into gold. The “gold” here, the transformative result, is a series of art works which are mesmerizingly austere and brilliantly conceived in a deceptively off-hand manner.

Truly at home with her simple materials which she binds and recombines into different spatial configurations around the gallery’s walls and floors, Hill allows them their own voice creating haunting works.

On the surface, Hill’s efforts are about having an interior dialogue with processes connecting drawing to sculpture and vice versa. Yet as I went around the gallery seeing the permutations, her basic, even incidental, materials (plaster, wood, string, cotton batting, cellophane tape, glue, paper, cellulose packing peanuts) were taking. This dialogue seemed to take the form of ruminations on exploring the principles and forces of light, adhesion, mass, gravitation, attraction and dispersal all interconnected serially within a perpetually expanding universe.

The artist’s ideas are about perception, as magic is. They are about limits and categories: ephemeral as opposed to substantive, profusion vs. waste. They are about the recording of the re-ordering of substances. Tied-in with this are ideas of circularity, the mutability of materials and the illusion of appearances (as in magic). As a magician, Hill pre-determines the presence of air, light, weight, density and accumulation to re-instigate and re-vitalize the space around each of her objects. Her work

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is about many things, but it touches on the recording of ephemera, the beauty of appearances and of cross-referenced accumulated detail. Her homespun materials and repeated mark-making create visual hymns to the powers of repeated movements and gestures. The rhythms of Hill's re-circulated materials appearing in different contexts display a capacity for artmaking which is intellectually curious and elegantly resolved without undo mannerism. Hill's works seem to be the vibrant residues, the end-result of a dialogue with haptic (that is, tactile) space.

The backdrop to her exhibition is a real *tour de force*. It is a 16' x 13' cyanotype drawing made of hundreds of six-inch "photographs" of ephemeral matter (strands of scotch tape). This "curtain" serves as a type of atmospheric stage for the two works on the floor of the main gallery *DIP TO COAT. ALLOW TO FALL FREELY ONTO WORK SURFACE.*, 1997 and *ADD AIR. LET SIT.*, 1997.

In the first work, we see a necklace of hundreds of dipped plaster forms, inside of which contain the scotch tape loops seen on the light-sensitive papers. Many references come to mind: teeth, bones, insects as these irregular three-dimensional blobs connected with a blue string create an environment of reticulated and undulating loops forming visual pools, and eddies, and pathways on the floor.

In the second work, Hill uses looped pieces of paper glued together to form a large stack of this intertwined material that sits on dozens of miniature sawhorses. This is a wonderful *contra Serra* play on the concept of what constitutes sculpture: here dematerialized weightless mass hovering a few inches over the floor. On the wall in the front room *ADD LINT. RE-COIL. THE COILS ARE READY TO SERVE.*, 1997, one hundred 9½" spools of lint attached to scotch tape are placed in a grid formation on a wall to create a spatially serene three-dimensional drawing using additional strands of wayward lint to gently make a philosophical reference to the intermittent connections between continuity and discontinuity, geometric regularity and irregularity, beginnings and ends. This work, in effect, is persuasive evidence that Robin Hill is a worthy successor to the mantle of Eva Hesse.

MAGIC-MAKING ACTIVITIES ON ANOTHER level will occur at the New Museum of Contemporary Art from December 4 through January 18 with the presentation of the performances of

Columbian born artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso.

Her work will deal with the anthropology of the flea circus. After spending four years perfecting her art she has mastered the intricacies of persuading Fearless Alfredo, the high dive artist to dive from a 1 1/2 foot-high diving board into a thimbleful of water; also participating will be Tini and Tiny, the husband and wife tightrope artists, cannonball artists Bounce the First and Bounce the Second, Pepita Pepon's juggling act, Mr. and Mrs. Magu's weightlifting competition and, Pierre and Pedro's swordfighting display, Brutus the Strong flea on earth will demonstrate his skills, as will Cardoso's Tango Fleas, the flea ballerinas. I have learned that the spectacle of 300 fleas jumping simultaneously under the direction of ring-master Cardoso will be the grand finale of the show.

The popular vernacular of the flea circus side-show is of magical presence because it sets the stage for the projection of human motivations onto the insect-performers dominated by their insect-trainer. Cardoso's work with these insects evokes how the mind puts images together sequentially in order to fabricate a network of image building (see how the flea "juggles" small cotton balls on his hind legs when put on its back, see it twirl a baton or a flag through an innate wiggling movement of its foreleg). This is done through the highly abstracted and barely visible image of a flea trained to react to stimulus and mimetically suggesting the actions of a human circus performer. Cardoso's storytelling and tall tale recitals of the traditional flea-circus — the *come-ons* that are part of the distracted viewing endemic of mass entertainment is subverted through the laboratory conditions of her flea-circus environment.

In such a contemplative environment Cardoso enables us to see how our minds work through the agency of a miniature theater that caricatures human values. As the eye follows these small creatures doing their "routines" it is absorbed as fully as it is when the artist's eye creates an artwork through steady observation or when the viewer engages with an artwork. As in art, such is the essence of magic and the flea circus: participatory illusionism with self-recognition as the goal.

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