



SUSAN BEE

Ice Cream Sunday: Paintings and Works on Paper

Ben Shahn Galleries William Paterson University
October 22-November 30, 2001

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Essay by David Shapiro

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William Paterson University
Nancy Einreinhofer, Director



Clouds of Joy, 2000, 24 x 20", oil, enamel, & collage on linen

Susan Bee: The Only Empress in a Dark Time

by David Shapiro

"Are you for or against ice cream?"

"The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream"—Wallace Stevens

Susan Bee is an antimetaphysical painter in the line of such wits as Hogarth, Peto, Picasso, Johns, and Salle. She is capable of yoking together without difficulty, to pervert Samuel Johnson's dicta against Donne, wildly dissimilar images. She tells a story that is as flat as Raymond Roussel, and yet she can also explode maximally with a full narrative that is as golden as a Mughal miniature of Eros and dust. She plays with a marginalia that is indeed a bestiary of some unrecoverable palette. Her intelligence links her with the painter-poets, such as Trevor Winkfield and Joe Brainard, who resolutely use a modest humor to spell out certain temptations in the bombast and false affirmations of our day. While she is capable of work in large scale, her work is intimate and full of three-dimensional quirks and charges. Meyer Schapiro referred to the levels of reality in the chair-

caning collages of Picasso from 1912, and Bee's work has an encyclopedic series of flows, switches, and relays. But just as I believe Picasso's collage finally emerges from something as normal but intent as Van Gogh's oval basket-filled onion still life, so Bee's work is finally not as eccentric as Roussel's hero, Master Canterel's rule-obsessed inventions. Her syntax, as it were, becomes as resolutely sexual as a Gertrude Stein song of repetition. (The point being that there is no absolute repetition, "but persistence.")

In her drawings and in her new work of exploding maximal roses and Bosch-like temptations, Bee induces in us a mesmerized reflection on the Lucretian pleasures of a universe seemingly abandoned by any transcendental term. Thus, the critical or skeptical edge to her non-illustrational illustrations or "profane" margins. It's her own *One-Way Street*, and Walter Benjamin the collagist poet reigns here in urban frenzy. A student of minimalists, she concludes with a potlatch of restless life.

Once, Kenneth Koch tempted the poet Francis Ponge with a question about whether the prose-poet admired New York for its tall buildings. Ponge instantly demurred. But he went on to say that he noticed a red light on the top of a Riverside Church and also a cherry on the tops of American martinis. He concluded by telling the American poet "You Americans seem to have a mania for cherries on the tops

of things." Koch told me that after that conjunction or insight or fusion he knew Ponge was a genius. It was the zero degree of provinciality and the height of surrealist fusions. This is the kind of combinatorial intelligence radiating in Bee's work at its best: celebrations like Joseph Cornell's boxes of the "highest and lowest reaches of the human spirit," in Fairfield Porter's accurate if humanist phrase. She may start with a three-dimensional doll, seashell, or photograph, but instead of the de Stijl mania that made Cornell so chaste, she then begins to create with very painterly strokes a manic depth that, after all, becomes her almost pointillist surface. This relay between Americana of the humblest variety and an early Mondrian-like reiterated mark makes her work full of a responsible joy.

She may seem to be playful, but actually there is this "supplemental" and almost globalizing fusion in the comic strippings here. Some have wondered about whether she can synthesize these paradoxes and disunities, but I would suggest that her forte is at leaving disunity alone, and in vexing the very question of unity. She drastically pierces her narratives, and raises (or razes) the semiotic richness to the stage at which Schapiro enunciated Cubism's multiplicity: I is a pronoun, I am Meyer Schapiro, I is a straight line. The variety of visual resources is not used merely to "synthesize" but to flaunt the necessity for anything but an inexhaustible cornucopia of parodies, homages, and the strange cancellations of all strategies. This

suggests, as Bakhtin did of Dostoyevsky's dialogic novels, that we must seek an end to the calculus of these curves and floating figures.

I too have dreamt of an end to the wars between figuration and abstraction, and with Lucio Pozzi, I have underlined pluralist strategies for getting beyond minor iconomachias of our day. Bee's style of anti-puritanical polystylistics within a single work seems to me to be one of the valiant efforts at a dissolution of dogmatic. (I found this to be the central strategy of parody and homage in John Ashbery's "The Skaters," and I also believe in the long sequence as a divertimento in many tempi. This is not a nostalgia for narrative but a fierce and intimate rejoinder to nostalgias in a parade of nostalgias.)

Her eroticism reminds one of the postcards of Rudy Burckhardt with its insistence on a sudden destruction of any pretense: a nude slicing across a Rothko. This is the carnival, moreover, in Bee's best panels, and while it can be melancholy as Salle, it is normally bumptious, hedonistic, and strangely dense. It is fairly fearless work. She has a preference for excess, and thus a lot of her work is more dangerous than the purism we may associate with certain reductions in minimal American art. The "fear of desire" is not a problem here, and her refulgent works bear a bizarre similarity to



Detail from *Weird Tales*, 2001, 50 x 52", mixed media and collage on linen

the sexual narratives of Julio Galan. But when it is all over, Bee's voice is unmistakable and her choices are various but recurrent enough to establish a canonic constellation. In the single maximal contradiction of her paintings, one seizes on the triumph of her anti-naturalistic naturalism. The joy of cinema's relative dynamizing of space and time is here, and her narratives give us elastic vignettes as romantic as the Pompeian frescoes or those of Herculaneum. Her use of folk idiom is countered by the learned brush. It's courageous in a low dishonest decade, and it is at the furthest remove from the idea of painting as either political exhortation or patriarchal preening.

Like her mother, Miriam Laufer, who was also a painter, she is in a sense an "abstract" painter, because all of these ladders and Sundays in no park, and sundaes without time, and gardens of mad margins finally create a series of "chord clusters" in which imagery, by overload, nears illegibility. In this, her work resembles those Indian miniature paintings of which Francesco Clemente once observed that the "whole world" is attempted. Frank O'Hara praised the nuptial globalism of Ashbery in "marrying the whole world." Clemente spoke to me once of this as a danger, but it is also a high, impossible standard. This love of an inclusive complexity may emerge from the intersection of Bee's experience as the daughter of artist parents with an Eastern European, Jewish background and her

own oblique relation to popular culture as a first-generation American. I am impressed, moreover, by the unity of all of the work and its development as another kind of sequence. After the death of her mother some years ago, she abandoned more minimal modes and immediately limned a haunting lighthouse amid ruins. The work has been accumulating its unities ever since, and its oxymorons.

I cannot conclude without saying how difficult it is, as Koch once observed, to reject the elegiac mood and sing a complex human and even communitarian happiness. The tone of Bee's paintings, and her marvelously intelligent collaborations with Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein, and others, is the tone of a double pun on the uncanny, in a time of homelessness. We are at home with her Americana, photographs, erotica, dolls and toys, but we are also frightened by their nearness and by their imbrication in narratives that are so discontinuous and multiple. For this reason, like the simultaneous radios of John Cage, she gives us a full concert. Her drawings, lean, elegant, more than charming, are perhaps one of the most fitting triumphs, by deletion, of this multiple artist, for whom painting is an implacable language without words.

During the worst years of the Vietnam War, when most poets were writing melodramatic propaganda about horror, Koch told me that he was perversely interested in listing joys and pleasures of peace rather

than lashing out dogmatically against the Empire. Wallace Stevens, also, opposed the notion that poets become soldiers in a reduction of content. In another dark time, just as we will observe opportunistic jingoism and false militancy of every stripe, in this time it is perhaps sufficient that Susan Bee's works remind us of the peaceful enumeration of what, after all, we are used to affirming in a minimal mode, like hopeless prayer.

— September 2001, New York City



Ladders and Chutes, 1999, 22 x 28", oil & collage on linen

Exhibition Checklist

1. *Raison d'Etre*, 2000, 18 x 36", oil, enamel, & collage on linen
2. *Ice Cream Sunday*, 1998, 48 x 66", oil & collage on linen
3. *Tempted*, 1999, 48 x 64", mixed media & collage on linen
4. *Love is a Gentle Whip*, 1999, 36 x 48",
mixed media & collage on linen
5. *Weird Tales*, 2001, 50 x 52", oil, enamel, watercolor,
and collage on linen
6. *Sprung Monuments*, with poems by Charles Bernstein, 2000,
50 x 56", mixed media & collage on linen
7. *Ladders and Chutes*, 1999, 22 x 28", oil & collage on linen
8. *Clouds of Joy*, 2000, 24 x 20", oil, enamel, & collage on linen
- 9.-12. Works on paper (4 drawings framed), untitled, 1999-2000,
25 1/2 x 33", mixed media: watercolor, ink, gouache, crayon,
charcoal, pencil, and collage

Susan Bee

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Ice Cream Sunday, Ben Shahn Galleries at William Paterson University of New Jersey, 2001
New Work, Herbert H. Lehman Suite, Rare Books and Manuscript Library,
School of International Affairs, Columbia University, New York, 2000
Beware the Lady: New Paintings and Works on Paper, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, 2000
Touchdown, Recent Paintings, Cornershop Gallery, Buffalo, 1999
Post-Americana: New Paintings, A.I.R. Gallery, New York, 1998
Recent Paintings and a New Artist's Book, Granary Books Gallery, New York, 1997
New Paintings, Virginia Lust Gallery, New York, 1992

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

Talking to Myself, Porter Troupe Gallery, San Diego, CA, 2001
Poetry Plastique, Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY, 2001
Women of the Book: Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes, Traveling Show, 1999-2001
Off the Shelf: Contemporary Artists' Books, Mass Moca, 2000
The Next Word, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY, 1998-1999
The Art of the Book, Sterling Library, Yale University, CT, 1998
A Secret Location on the Lower East Side, The New York Public Library, 1998
Field Days, Cerulean Embankments, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, MA, 1996
My Friends in My Apartment, Barbara Pollack's apt., New York, 1996
Open Book, Barnard College Gallery, New York, 1993, 1994, 1996
A Child's World, Dru Arstark Gallery, New York, 1995
Symbolic Surface, Klarfeld Perry Gallery, New York, 1994
Art & Language: Re-reading the Boundless Book, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1994
Fire and Ice, Hallwalls, Buffalo, 1991
Burning in Hell, Franklin Furnace, New York, 1991
Fresh from New York, Artspace, Auckland, New Zealand, 1988
In Pieces: The Figure Fragmented, P.S. 122, New York, 1987
Heresies: Issues that won't go away, PPOW, New York, 1987
Woman Artists of the 80s: New Talent, A.I.R., New York, 1984
Project Installation, P.S. 1, New York, 1982

PUBLICATIONS

Coeditor: *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism*,
Duke University Press, 2000
M/E/A/N/I/N/G, 1986-1996, New York
Guest coeditor, *Ripple Effects: Painting and Language, New Observations*, #113, 1996, NY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Clay, Steven, *When Will the Book Be Done? Granary's Books*, Granary Books, 2001
- Clay, Steven and Rodney Phillips, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side*, The New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998
- Cotter, Holland, "Poetry Plastique," *The New York Times*, Feb. 23, 2001
- Cotter, Holland, "When Word's Meaning Is In Their Look," *The New York Times*, Oct. 16, 1998
- Drucker, Johanna, "Susan Bee: Post-Americana," *Art Papers* 47, July-August 1998
- Drucker, Johanna, *The Next Word*, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, NY, 1998
- Drucker, Johanna, "Susan Bee: Arcane Painting," *Sulfur*, No. 28, 1991
- Drucker, Johanna, *The Century of Artists' Books*, Granary Books, 1995
- Goldsmith, Kenneth, "Are You Experienced?," *Sulfur*, No. 41, 1997
- Goodman, Jonathan, "Susan Bee at A.I.R.," *Art in America*, October 1998
- Hoffberg, Judith, *Women of the Book: Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes*, Florida Atlantic University, 2001
- Licata, Elizabeth, "Bee's Beat Feminism at Cornershop," *Artvoice*, Buffalo, 1999
- McEvilley, Thomas, "Susan Bee at A.I.R.," *Art in America*, December 2000
- McGann, Jerome, *A Book of the Book*, Rothenberg and Clay, eds., Granary Books, 2000
- Morgan, Robert C., *After the Deluge: Essays for the Art of the Nineties*, Red Bass, 1993
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- Robins, Corinne, *Women Artists of the 80s: New Talent*, A.I.R., New York, 1984
- Sanders, Jay and Charles Bernstein, *Poetry Plastique*, Boesky Gallery & Granary Books, NY, 2001
- Suvakovic, Misko, "Painting After Painting: An Analysis of Susan Bee's Paintings," *ProFemina*, Yugoslavia, 1995; *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* #18, NY, 1995; *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism*, Duke University Press, 2000
- Tabios, Eileen, "Susan Bee: New Paintings, Artist's Books," *Review*, December 1, 2000
- Yau, John, *Beware the Lady: New Paintings and Works on Paper*, catalog essay, 2000
- Zivancevic, Nina, "Susan Bee," *NY Arts*, Vol 5, no 5, May 2000

WRITING BY SUSAN BEE

- Acme Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1994, New York
- Art Journal*, Winter 1999, Vol. 58, No. 4, New York
- Art & Artists*, 13:7, 1984, New York
- Beauty and Critique*, ed. R. Milazzo, Mussman-Bruce, 1982, NY
- Chain*, Vol. 1, 1994, Buffalo
- Journal of Artists' Books*, 3, Spring 1995
- L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, 1978-79, New York
- The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1984
- Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2001
- Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. Moyra Davey, Seven Stories Press, 2001
- M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism*,
Duke University Press, 2000

M/E/A/N/I/N/G, Nos. 1, 2, 5, 7, 12, 13, 15, 1986-94, New York
New Observations, #113, 1996, New York
Poetics Journal, "Women and Modernism," No. 4, 1984, Berkeley
Poetry Plastique, Marianne Boesky Gallery & Granary Books, 2001, New York
Talking the Boundless Book, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, 1995
Women Artists News, 1979-80, New York: Editor
Women of the Book: Jewish Artists, Jewish Themes, Florida Atlantic University, 2001

SELECTED ARTIST'S BOOKS

A Girl's Life, with Johanna Drucker, Granary Books, 2002
Bed Hangings, poems by Susan Howe, Granary Books, 2001
Log Rhythms, poem by Charles Bernstein, Granary Books, 1998
Little Orphan Anagram, poems by Charles Bernstein, Granary Books, 1997
Talespin, Granary Books, 1995
Fool's Gold, poems by Charles Bernstein, Chax Press, 1991
The Nude Formalism, poems by Charles Bernstein, Sun and Moon, 1989
The Occurrence of Tune, poem by Charles Bernstein, Segue, 1981

GRANTS

Yaddo Fellowship, 2001
Fellowship, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, 1999
Publication Grants, Visual Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, 1992-1997
Publication Grants, Visual Arts Program, New York State Council on the Arts, 1989-1997
Yaddo Fellowship, 1996

COLLECTIONS

Selected Public Collections (Artist's Book)
Getty Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, Yale University, Clark Art Institute, New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, Princeton University Library, Dartmouth College Art Library, University of California, San Diego Special Collections, Harvard University Library

GALLERY REPRESENTATION

A.I.R. Gallery, New York
Artist's Books, Granary Books, New York

EDUCATION

Hunter College, M.A., Art, 1977
Barnard College, B.A., Art History and Art, 1973
High School of Music and Art, NY, 1969

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