As the line between the press release and art criticism grows ever hazier, dealers and critics get tighter and tighter. Even though they seem to be in the judgment seat, critics depend on dealers; they want to be invited to parties and included in the art world, and even more, most critics need the money from the extra writing jobs that dealers dole out. Dealers, on the other hand, seem to be dependent on critics, hanging on their reviews, but they are often really indifferent to them; critics are interchangeable, only as good as their institutional power and use-value in terms of what they sell said in print and where. The two are supposed to be careful around each other, careful about presents and prompting. On the other hand, they are in business together, working to promote artists and accumulate cultural capital and simply get paid.

I don’t know any dealers really well; some of them seem nice and smart, some of them seem dumb and vapid (or any combination of those qualities), but you could say the same thing about critics—or artists. Some dealers are more helpful than others when you need a slide or information; some of them show better art than others, although not necessarily the nicest or smartest one. And the smallest galleries are not necessarily better or more vapid or authentic than the more successful ones. Sometimes modesty indicates virtue, and sometimes simply modest ambition—or even bad art.

But maybe it’s not a coincidence that I picked two not-so-profit dealers for this not-for-profit space. Some dealers start a gallery and then think, “Who should I show?” Mitchell Algus and Michele Maccarone both put the art before the purse, accumulating lists of artists they wanted to see, and then opening their galleries. This also means that they both have a particular “taste,” not so common itself in these days of pluralism and diversification (more than diversity), when a lot of people are trying to cover the bases. Mitchell’s program is one of painting, sculpture and conceptual art that is fundamentally modernist, but interested in alternative routes, from Charles Henri Ford to Joan Sammel to Nicholas Krushenick to Kathe Burkhart. Using her sprawling gallery on the Lower East Side, Michele shows projects by artists like Christian Jankowski and Christoph Büchel who are based primarily in a post-studio practice, making work for her particular space, altered to their requirements—often in extreme ways.

There’s no way to neatly wrap up the four artists that Mitchell and Michele chose into a theme show or a tidy pre-planned concept. This annual program at apexart is based on personal and professional contacts between critics, dealers, and artists, not on a curatorial concept (which maybe we see enough of in museums and biennials, in any case). Not surprisingly, however, social connections can produce conceptual links and common practices. All of the artists in this exhibition are interested in media imagery and popular culture. John Dogg acts as a kind of father figure to the three younger men, who share a generational relationship with appropriation art, although not necessarily the nicest or smartest one. And the smallest galleries are not necessarily better or more vapid or authentic than the more successful ones. Sometimes modesty indicates virtue, and sometimes simply modest ambition—or even bad art.

Since 1996, apexart has worked with gallerists to present its Summer Program. Although the format has changed slightly over the years, the aim has always been to tap into the energy of the commercial scene. In the past the program featured separate exhibitions for each dealer (“444” and “222”). This year, all the artists will be featured in one exhibition. For our 2003 Summer Program, apexart invited Katy Siegel, assistant professor of art history and criticism at Hunter College and contributing editor, Artforum, to curate the program. Katy Siegel selected Mitchell Algus and Michele Maccarone—both put the art before the purse, accumulating lists of artists they wanted to see, and then opening their galleries. This also means that they both have a particular “taste,” not so common itself in these days of pluralism and diversification (more than diversity), when a lot of people are trying to cover the bases. Mitchell’s program is one of painting, sculpture and conceptual art that is fundamentally modernist, but interested in alternative routes, from Charles Henri Ford to Joan Sammel to Nicholas Krushenick to Kathe Burkhart. Using her sprawling gallery on the Lower East Side, Michele shows projects by artists like Christian Jankowski and Christoph Büchel who are based primarily in a post-studio practice, making work for her particular space, altered to their requirements—often in extreme ways.

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Mitchell Algus

In 1986, at Neo-Geo’s apogee, John Dogg mounted a mishapen, clinically obvious exhibition. Instead of presenting extravagant chrome liquor decanters or pristine purchases from high-end airport gift shops, Dogg showed unleathered Ecorouline wheel covers. These held their own amidst the grandiose presentations, calmly undermining the class politics that undergird the art world. Seen in the East Village at Lisa Spellman’s 303 Gallery, around the corner and down the block from International With Monument and Nature Morte, and just prior to that scene’s implosion, Dogg’s show was a kind of high-water mark. If not of itself an endgame, a notable transition. The end of the inning.

In bitha retrospective, Dogg’s show was casually prescient, anticipating Neo-Geo’s evolution into the pronounced, clinic-like mode of institutional critique. This shift in focus—from the accessories of power to the social organization of power—was a moral one. It shed in one shot the congenital complicity of the 80s art world. Dogg’s was the smart, “I can live without this. It frills-free version. Just right for the then impending endgame.

Kaz Oshiro was born in occupied Okinawa, Japan. He lives in Los Angeles. Oshiro makes flawless Mongrel-fuel replicate of American sub-cultural artifacts: Marshall amps, Fender stacks, sticker-festooned amplifiers, appliances. These function as cultural mementos, memorializing without the real thing, made of constructed memories only. Oshiro is acutely aware of the compromises cultural engagement entails. In a contemporary reformulation of Knausgaard’s famous dictum regarding his work’s position between art and life, Oshiro pretends, to “hate something that I like and like something that I hate. I hope to create Post-Post Pop Art [painting] that juxtaposes Pop and Minimalism with the flavor of Neo Geo, appropriation, and Photorealism, and present them as a still life of my generation.”

Robert Cughi’s art practice addresses cultural and social estrangement. In his self-imposed outsider position, Cughi’s marginalization is extreme. He grows his fingernails into elongated spikes that regulate his ability to function normally. He wears glasses that invert and distort everything he sees, rendering him unable to make sense of the visual world. He gained weight, dyed his hair white and dressed in his father’s clothes, even more, he studied his father and learned his gestures and habits in order to take on this new persona. This performance became a daily practice, a living sculpture with no commodified art product except for some scant documentation, such as the old photo. It existed primarily as a story passed on word of mouth. Cughi claims no space with his performances. He demands nothing of his audience as he proceeds with his artwork alone every moment of every day, temporarily aged, uncomfortably overweight—an extreme endurance test.

During this period, Cughi made Goodgriefies, an animated video. At the very beginning of the video, he appears as a pastiche of himself and his father, as an old man in a grey suit weighing round spectacles. At the same moment in time. The video itself explores the complications of generational identity and relationship through the medium of familiar cartoon characters. Characters appropriatized from Looney Tunes, Scooby Doo, The Muppets, and Planetes are montaged and combined with those from more contemporary series such as The Simpsons, Beavis and Butthead, and South Park. Just as Cughi has intensified his genetic relationship to his father by collapsing the temporal space between them, Goodgriefies takes figures like Charlie Brown and Bart Simpson, one the child of the other, and forces them to co-exist as peers, at the same moment in time.

The father also plays a central role in the work of Nate Lowman. Inspired by his own father, who wears a beard, Lowman has been collecting images of men masked by facial hair: Jim Morrison, Jerry Garcia, Tom Cruise, John Walker Smith, and Ted Kaczynski, among others. He tediously catalogs, appropriates, prints, photographs, and arranges these found and created images in a constantly growing and fluctuating project. The quaint wall installation is heavily loaded with social and personal iconography of madness, rebellion, politics, and violence. Lowman himself is a second—or is it third?—generation appropriation artist, building on the work of artists like Andy Warhol, Richard Prince, and Chona Curiel that take media images and re-evaluate them.

Michele Maccarone

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