

landscape is literally filled in with a damning, if slightly abstracted, handwritten exegesis on the creep of development into the natural areas that the artist frequents. In *A California Diatribe*, 2006, a narrow, horizontal book that one walks the length of to read as if hiking alongside it, he re-creates the topography of the desert, hills, and mountains near his home with text that rises and falls in a kind of narrative contour map. One spread takes its language directly from the real estate market, a series of disingenuous claims bitterly appropriated by the artist: WATCH THE DOLPHINS PLAY; LUXURY UPGRADES WITH ART STUDIO; ARCHITECTURE AS ART.

Crotty's rage in this work and in *Twilight in the West*, 2006, is startling, to be sure, but it highlights the paradox at the heart of his project: Nature is lovely, but the ravages of civilization create the work's bracing tension—the appearance of the satellite dish under the dome of the sky conjures an undeniable frisson. As with Wallace Stevens's jar on a Tennessee hill, nature arranges itself around the interloper, and art is the result.

—Emily Hall

## Stephen Mueller

BAUMGARTNER GALLERY

The *Tao te Ching* indicates the essential role of emptiness as an element in the creation of things, habitable space, and sentient beings: "We shape clay into a pot, / but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. . . . We work with being / but non-being is what we use." Painter Stephen Mueller refers to this emptiness by suspending enigmatic objects in boundless colored space, making canvases that hover between lyrical abstraction and geometric decoration.

The only recognizable and repeated formal element in Mueller's work is a vase, which evokes the votive containers in Tibetan Buddhist altars and which the artist defines as "a cauldron, a mythical vessel from which everything is formed." As in Tibetan *tankas*, in which the contrasting colors and repeated symmetry of the figures of the Buddha represent the illusory nature of the concept of duality, Mueller creates a dialogue between subject and object, background and foreground, to express what he calls "the folly of duality, the falsity of the idea of self." In the new paintings shown recently at Baumgartner Gallery, vividly colored opaque forms float against soft, fluid backgrounds, every element interrelated and integrated into the whole.

Every part seems perpetually about to become something else, nothing can be taken for granted, and the notion of certainty falls apart. Mueller's forms are as ephemeral as patterns in a kaleidoscope.

In *Show Up Showdown*, 2006, a puff of yellow powder escapes from a blue and red striped container, above which a pendulum is suspended. Shapes on the right-hand side seem captured mid-drift, while shadings, outlines, and internal geometries echo one another in an endless play of references. Formal elements are in balance, and the composition seems suspended in an ecstasy of absolute quiet. Mueller here reminds us that reality is in a state of continuous passage from one physical state to another by wedding the Buddhist concept of impermanence with Marx and Engels's "All that is solid melts into air."

Stephen Mueller, *Mneme*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50".



While inspired by tantric Buddhism, some of Mueller's paintings have Greek titles—*Mneme*, *Zephyros*, *Orpheo* (all 2006)—a move influenced by the artist's reading of Italian scholar Roberto Calasso, whose works illuminate the cultural and spiritual path that leads from ancient Greece to the Vedas to Buddhism. Mueller draws on different spiritual and mythological references precisely because his interest lies both in the concept of myth in general and in an expanded spirituality. In his smaller paintings, the contrast between background and the colored painted silhouettes in the foreground introduces a regular dimensional matrix periodically broken up by the introduction of "off" elements. Vibrantly colored geometric forms appear suspended in the foreground for an instant before collapsing back into the undifferentiated void. Every form becomes the condensation of an exhaled breath, holy for the briefest of brief moments.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

## Thomas Zipp

HARRIS LIEBERMAN

Thomas Zipp could never be called unambitious: The Berlin-based artist's first major solo gallery show in New York, at Harris Lieberman, not only coincided with his second solo exhibition in Los Angeles and with a room-size installation at the Berlin Biennale but also tackled some complex subject matter. Zipp frequently interweaves aspects of art history, philosophy, and science. Here, in a show that comprised paintings, works on paper, and a sculptural installation, he sought out the residual value of early-twentieth-century utopian thought in a nuclear age (nuclear war being the "*Uranlicht*" ["Uranium Light"] of the exhibition's title). Given the scope and gravity of these concerns, Zipp sensibly, and adroitly, dispensed with didactic literalism in favor of suggestive indirectness.

All alone high up on a large wall near the gallery entrance, *Harris* (all works 2006), a letter-size mixed-media drawing depicting Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris, who orchestrated the Allied saturation bombing of Germany during WWII (and who is the great-uncle of one of the gallery's owners), served as the historical anchor for Zipp's imaginative multimedia explorations. Other small drawings feature formal portraits of a rogues' gallery of anonymous, well-heeled men and skeletons, all of whose eyes are variously punctured by nails and tacks (like victims of a voodoo ritual) or covered with coins (as if in preparation for the afterlife). Some also spout empty speech bubbles. Several large paintings, two propped up on leglike wooden poles, depict imaginary plants sprouting out of demuded, postapocalyptic landscapes. In the gallery's main room, a handmade organ—featuring on-off switches and volume dimmers in place of keys—stood sentinel with a small army of boxy black speakers. Those adventurous enough to play the instrument were treated to a grating mixture of synthesized sounds that, given the context, evoked air-raid sirens. (In fact, one of the speakers houses a repurposed GDR siren.) The late-Rothko palette—sooty grays, earthy browns, burnt ochre, eggplant, claret, and black—connected



Thomas Zipp, *Geist Ueber Materie (Spirit Over Matter)* (detail), 2006, mixed media, wall text, and framed mixed-media drawing on paper, dimensions variable.

these otherwise disparate works and contributed to the exhibition's doleful atmosphere.

Zipp's syncretic approach to history, in which seemingly incompatible figures and events are brought together in the service of a romantic vision, evokes the work of Anselm Kiefer, though the younger artist generates meaning through constellations of objects rather than through the hubristic appropriation of real, cosmic constellations. The exhibition checklist demonstrated this accumulative strategy, as seemingly random groupings of objects—two mixed-media drawings and a painting; the organ sculpture, a drawing, and a wall text—constituted individual artworks; in *Uranlicht*, drawn lines escaping one man's mouth stretch onto a nearby canvas. Some might consider this interdependence a weakness, an indicator of discrete works' inability to stand alone, but here it seemed a smart way to acknowledge that no single work could tell the whole story.

Despite the variety of media deployed in this exhibition, Zipp is primarily a painter, with a wan aesthetic that calls to mind the dour imaginings of Luc Tuymans. The netlike grids that arc across several of the canvases might be metaphorical representations of the way in which the artist's reverence for modernist aesthetics undergirds his weighty archival investigations. (This is sometimes literally the case, as in an installation, presented last year at Art Basel Miami Beach, comprising small canvases and framed drawings hung atop a blown-up black-and-white reproduction of a Jackson Pollock painting.) In this show, Zipp put forth a strong case for this holistic approach, deftly blending formalist concerns and the lessons of history while avoiding the bombast that often characterizes proponents of only one or the other.

—Brian Sholis

## Joe Fig PLUS ULTRA

Dollhouses are funny things. Introduced in northern Europe in the seventeenth century, they were originally used by rich women to manage their households, providing a virtual view of the premises. Later, they became more akin to little museums or cabinets of curiosities. More recently, they've become toys with an edge of macabre kitsch. Joe Fig's recent sculpture borrows heavily from the dollhouse idiom, co-opting the God's-eye perspective, the miniaturization, and the implication of a narrative (here, art historical), all played out on a tiny stage in a parallel world that mimics our own.

In the past, Fig has made painstakingly accurate models of artists' studios—Constantin Brancusi's, Willem de Kooning's, Jackson Pollock's—which included little artist figures, further stoking the dollhouse association. For his recent show at Plus Ultra, he narrowed his focus and mostly eschewed the dolls, homing in instead on painters' studio tables. This time the obsessively detailed models, housed in Plexiglas boxes that functioned like tiny vitrines, represent in miniature the work surfaces of Matthew Ritchie, Julie Mehretu, Amy Sillman, Chuck Close, Dana Schutz, Karin Davie, Philip Pearlstein, Barnaby Furnas, and other painters. (Two other works featured the opulent Long Island studios of April Gornik and Eric Fischl, in toto, figures included.) On these tables are the tools of the trade, arranged according to the artists' proclivities. The table becomes a synecdoche for the studio and the work. But, except in the Fischl and Gornik studios, we don't see any actual paintings; Fig's project may tempt some viewers to track those down elsewhere.

Previously, Fig's replica studios, complete with figures caught in the act of artmaking, ran the risk of being too cute (Awww, look at

the little Brancusi!). In the new work, this is still a problem (Look at those tiny paper towels! And the itty-bitty paintbrushes!), but one that Fig partially solves by providing an audio accompaniment in the form of an interview with each artist, relayed via headphones connected to the base of each sculpture. In these discussions, Fig asks each of his subjects a series of questions, from how long they have been in their current studio to "Please describe a typical day, being as specific as possible." The responses provide a day-in-the-life narrative but also function as shoptalk, as conversations range over the arrangement of the room, preferred brands of paint, how many paintings are worked on at a time, and the ways in which a tool can become a talisman or a fetish. Fig ends with larger questions like "What advice would you give a young artist that is just starting out?" (Ignore the market and be true to yourself is the general line.)

What separates Fig's project from interviews in the Archives of American Art or the *Paris Review* is the visual component, naturally, but also the fact that Fig's exchanges aren't explicitly anthropological or historicizing. Fig's work hinges on the cult of the artist—why else would we care what Dana Schutz does during the day?—but he undercuts the notion that what an artist does is inherently fascinating by showing how the daily life of a painter can be as programmatic and mundane as that of an accountant. For while the painter's table might look to some like the altar where art is consecrated, here it is literally downsized and accompanied by commentaries that bring the process back to earth, resulting in a kind of art for artists that also feels like a public service, or a reminder that art (painting in particular) often begins with just showing up at the studio.

—Martha Schwendener

## WASHINGTON, DC

### Jeff Spaulding G FINE ART

It would sometimes be comforting to think of borders as consistently clear and absolute, but the border between what we see and what we think we see, for one, is rather less certain. In his recent show "Mine" at G Fine Art, Jeff Spaulding compellingly investigated this strain of perceptual equivocation via a collection of compact sculptures constructed from (mostly) found objects. In a recent interview, Spaulding professed to be intrigued with how an object might represent two things at once while maintaining a balance of meaning between them, one that could shift from "playful to dangerous, comical to sexual, humorous to violent." To that end, he conjures piquant deceptions that establish borders as loci of ambiguity. They become sources of anxious misperceptions, stings of recognition, and, on occasion, a good chuckle.

The exhibition's title, "Mine," is likewise irresolute, potentially referring at once to possession, to the act of mining (that is, delving deeply into something), and, more disturbingly, to an explosive device. The objects he finds (and occasionally fishes out of the Potomac River) are laden with associations that are hard to disguise,



Joe Fig, *Julie Mehretu*:  
April 18, 2006 (detail),  
mixed media,  
11 x 11 x 9 1/2".