

The concept of the "Warehouse" was conceived twenty years ago, when I created two series of art works: one which I called "Pages of the Diary," and another called "Heads." These pieces transformed my ideas, feelings and attitudes – virtually anything that I thought or felt – into visualizations. I created one piece every day. Sometimes, the process spilled over into the next day, but as soon as I finished that piece, I started working on a new one. In two months, I had created about fifty pictures. At that time, I did not have a Gallery where I could exhibit these pieces, so I developed a strategy to create a sample or two of each concept or idea and then moved on to other projects.

In 1989, I began to use cardboard boxes from supermarkets as the raw material for my art. The process involved no drawing, and no painting: just cutting and pasting. These constraints make it a very difficult medium, one that demands intense concentration and precision, as well as the highest levels of imagination and improvisation. It was a unique approach and I was so satisfied with the results that I continued working in this cardboard medium for the next thirteen years.

My first show with these cardboard creations was held in 1993 at the Frank Bustamante Gallery. I have had three subsequent exhibitions at the OK Harris Gallery. The last one, in May 2002, was reviewed by The New York Times. But that show took five years to produce, and the central piece, "The Pyramid", was 12.5 ft. x 28 ft. and contained 17,000 individual elements. It took one year to create and I did not use assistants. I would compare the creative process to a monk's meditation, far away from society, out in the wilderness. Because during that time, I cleansed my mind and soul of any ideas not connected to these pieces.

After my last show, I decided to do something totally different and go back to my beloved medium: oil. I wanted this project to be on a grand scale, filling four walls of a gallery from floor to ceiling with a mass of small paintings of different shapes, themes and concepts.

I would create these paintings from a variety of sources – newspapers, magazines, advertising, popular culture,

art history, as well as my own observations – and, of course, all of these sources would be interpreted and visualized by my imagination. To anchor the show in the past, I used "Pages from the Diary" and "Heads" as the core of the display. I call this new painting installation "Warehouse" because it is, in fact, the warehouse of my passion, my hate, my joy, my irony, my belief and my sorrow.

I had never done anything on this scale before. The key to the installation's structure is its visual organization. I divided the four walls of the gallery with vertical and horizontal lines into a grid. When I calculated the scale of the grid and the sizes of the pictures, I found that I needed 168 images to fill the framework. I already had 49 paintings from my previous body of work, so I had to create 119 more pieces.

I wanted to balance the massive impact of the entire group of paintings with the individual effect of each picture in its own space. So the viewer has a variety of options: he or she can absorb the overall impression of the entire show, and then concentrate on a single piece, or the flow of one painting into another.

I don't want to guide the viewer, but give them the choice of where to start and how to proceed. That's why this show has no beginning and no end. You can circle around, crisscross, start from the top or the bottom and never get lost. And because the whole installation is organized on a grid, the edges of the paintings create a flow that follows the lines of the grid. Sometimes, to avoid monotony, that flow is interrupted by vertical or horizontal pictures, but then the flow continues.

This juxtaposition of a carefully calculated grid framework with the emotional charge of the individual pictures, mirrors the laws of nature – balancing order and chaos.

I began to work, using the grid as a guide – from the front wall, first row, to the second row, filling in the spaces, one by one. And the process for completing the installation was a process of discovery. Every day, when I began to work on the next piece, I didn't know exactly

what it would be. My destination was still a mystery. But there was a clue: the picture I had just finished – its nearest neighbor in the installation – pointed me in the right direction. So each new element grew out of the previous painting I had done. Each new piece was, in some way, a counterpart or a reflection of the previous piece. In that sense, the installation was a constantly self-regulating, self-improving, self-correcting esthetic “machine.” And every day was an adventure for me, exciting and with an element of risk.

Each picture has its own style or method of creation, and each has been done to the best of my ability. Some took an hour to finish, others a couple of weeks. And because each image works with the neighboring ones on every level – color, composition, emotion, concept, etc. – this show differs from the usual group show, where the paintings are not necessarily compatible with each other – where there is often cacophony instead of melody.

To avoid this, and ensure a sense of unity and harmony in this display of 168 different images, I have orchestrated their relationships in several different ways. “Pages from the Diary” are the only images accompanied by text. Looking at them, reading the text and then looking at the neighboring pictures and reading their names, will help to develop the viewers’ own associations and, at the same time, capture the spirit of the show.

The largest piece in the show is “Collector,” which is located on a back wall. I created it in 1984 from 4 components that are stacked together on the wall. I called this kind of composition a “conglomerate.” I started to create conglomerates back in 1983. The first one was “Holiday Purim” and the last was “The Guillotine,” done in 1989. Conglomerates were developed with the same concept as the current show “Warehouse,” but on a smaller scale. They are combinations of different elements, executed in different styles and with different materials, but brought together as a unified entity. This unification of different images in one construction helps to convey complex messages and, when I was working on them, these conglomerates provided me with an ideal form of self-expression and reflection on the world around me.

In 1987, some of these works, with related material, were shown in the Mokotoff Gallery in Manhattan’s East Village.

John Johnston\* wrote an essay, “Polyphonic Images,” for the catalog of that 1987 show. Some excerpts from that essay, written 20 years ago, sound just as fresh today and are relevant to the meaning of my current show.

“In the past few years the concepts and ideas of the Russian literary critic and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin have found wide applications in the analyses of American literary critics.

Gregory Perkel’s current exhibition at Mokotoff Gallery suggests there may be visual applications as well. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky’s determining compositional aim was always to unify highly heterogeneous and incompatible material without enforcing a new subordination or hierarchy. The result was a ‘polyphonic’ text composed of ‘unmerged’ and ‘multi-accented’ voices and styles. Furthermore, such a text could be seen as a response to capitalism’s promiscuous mixing of heterogeneous social forms and destruction of all ‘organic order.’ This dissolution of social forms and languages bring about a state reminiscent of carnival, and Bakhtin argues that in fact Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel is a modern transformation of a literary form, Menippean satire, closely associated with carnival. But whereas traditional carnival was a communal celebration of a temporary suspending of ‘the law,’ the carnival of capitalism results from the dissolution of all values in the crucible of its own law, under the sign of the cash nexus.

“It was just such a ‘carnival’ of heterogeneous forms and languages that Perkel encountered when he arrived in New York after emigrating from Russia in 1977.

“In the art world there was not only a bewildering variety of styles and practices but no dominant critical

discourse to help sort things out. The last clearly authoritative position founded upon aesthetic criteria - the one imposed by Clement Greenberg and followers like Michael Fried - had dissolved in aporia of Post-minimalism. What had emerged on the 'other side' was a plethora of styles and practices referred to in the late Seventies, somewhat uncomfortably, as 'pluralism'. The problem with pluralism, it was often said, is that it never really existed; in this instance, it only heralded a situation - fully manifest in the Eighties - of which murmuring that 'art is dead, everything is permitted' might perhaps be the best watchword. But what of course prevented a truly radical plurality of styles from emerging was the art market itself, the whole gallery-museum system which could not only absorb contestatory and subversive practices like Robert Rauschenberg's or Michael Asher's but convert 'alternative spaces' into a pool of farm clubs for the big-name galleries.

"This is the context into which Gregory Perkel's current exhibition of paintings seeks to insert itself...."

"Earlier I suggested that Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic text could provide a model for integrating the great variety of tones, techniques and subject matter evident in Perkel's current work. One essential strategy for producing a polyphonic text is to 'carnivalize' the image, either by inverting its usual associations (like master/slave), or by literally turning it upside down (ass/face) or by having it render a grotesque image of the body. The show contains numerous obvious examples, but in Perkel's most ambitious works this carnivalization of the image occurs within a single 'conglomerate' painting or construction...."

..."Beyond the Dust of Times Square", is similarly haunted by an ambiguous sense of temporality. The intense color of the advertising billboards makes the figure of the organ-grinder and parrot seem spectral and shadowy, like ghosts from another world. Yet the

'witnessed' by the background rows of faces and from which a small child - only the leg is visible - has already departed, presumably in search of other entertainments. Here the spatial ambiguity created by the framing French door panels (is the figure inside or outside, and inside or outside what?) reinforces analogically the sense of temporal ambiguity and dislocation. That organ-grinders no longer walk Times Square, except in memory or fantasy, may be the painting's overt assumption, but here again the artist's use of unusual and striking material juxtapositions gives the work a power and interest beyond that of its declarative statement. The reference of the billboard to film ghostly image of that which no longer exist - is hardly accidental, and further underscores the ambiguity of the greater material 'presence' of the figures below...."

...."But whether or not Perkel's current work, when all the pieces are taken together, presents a precise visual equivalent of Menippean satire or Bakhtin's polyphonic text, as I have been suggesting all along. There can be no doubt that it exhibits strong affinities with this mixed and heterogeneous form in a number of obvious ways. Perhaps the most important thing to note is that as a method of composition, it provides a vital alternative to both the 'monological' seriality of much current painterly practice and the mushy soup of the various neoexpressionism. It is in fact perfect means for Perkel to realize his unique talent as both a painter and satirical observer of the mad consumerist carnival in which we now live."

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see images mentioned  
by John Johnston in section CONGLOMERATES