

# The New York Times

Across the Trees. Romanian Art Now

by Holland Cotter

April 2007

E34

N +

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, APRIL 13, 2007

## Art in Review

### James Ensor

Paintings

Peter Freeman Inc.  
560 Broadway, at Prince Street,  
SoHo  
Through May 12

I'm not sure how this exhibition of 16 small paintings by James Ensor (1860-1949) landed in a SoHo gallery, but here it is, and it's a treat, a full-color follow-up to the survey of his works on paper at the Drawing Center in 2001.

Most of the pictures are from the 1880s, with a few leaps to later dates. Ensor was born and spent most of his life in Ostend, Belgium, a seaside resort where his family ran a souvenir gift shop. He left for only two years to study art in Brussels. But in that time he forged links with avant-garde circles, with which he maintained contact from his attic studio back home.

The show's earliest paintings, among them a couple of still lifes, indicate that Ensor was fully up to speed on Symbolist and Neo-Impressionist developments. He was also exploring religious subjects. And he could paint like a dream. His 1880 "Judas Throwing the Silver into the Temple" is at once shadow-pooled and refulgent, Rembrandt with the lights turned up.

In the late '80s something happened. Maybe he hit a depression or, as was the case with his contemporaries Munch and van Gogh, isolation loosened him up. His palette whitened; his hand grew more draftsmanly. He fixed on strange, fresh themes: skeletons, human grotesques, the carnival masks in his family shop.

Sometimes the work is clearly satirical, as in "The Baths at Ostende" (1890), with its fat prelates, scrawny lovers and randy gents packed to the horizon. The paintings of masks are more mysterious. The masks themselves are comically malevolent enough to scare away angels and demons alike. Ensor further animates them by attaching them to figures in tableaux that recall Bosch, Goya, Daumier and Watteau. In one of the show's latest paintings, a Crucifixion scene from 1938, masks and figures fuse, and both blend with the hellish atmosphere. Carnival is a crazed Lenten drama; comedy and tragedy are one.

Young artists have been looking at Ensor. Dana Schutz, who has a solo show at Zach Feuer in Chelsea, riffed memorably on his "Entry of Christ Into Brussels in 1889" a few years ago. But even the most interesting contemporary painting feels studied and controlled, while the most interesting Ensor feels totally mad, even if he himself was quite sane.

Asked in a survey what his greatest misery was, he answered, probably in an antic tone, "the horror of an exhibition." He didn't have many. Even so, the Belgian government acknowledged his career by making him a baronet. It should have made him king: king of art, king of masks, king of the great gift shop of the world he surveys. Long does he reign.

HOLLAND COTTER

### Philip Pearlstein

Betty Cunningham Gallery  
541 West 23rd Street, Chelsea  
Through April 28

Anybody who brings the level of patience and single-minded devotion that Philip Pearlstein has practiced



"Christ in Agony," an oil from the late 1930s in a retrospective of 16 works by the influential Belgian painter James Ensor at Peter Freeman Inc.

nearly 50 years to his paintings of nudes can only be said to be in a state akin to rapture. That's not the initial conclusion to draw from the pictures, whose deadpan manner has long been a problem for many people. They miss the point.

Mr. Pearlstein, at 83, still declines to please in the easy ways figure painters can. His dour nudes doze amid a clutter of kilims, plastic blow-up chairs, antique toys, weather-vanes, fluorescent Mickey Mouse signs and model boats. They're frankly artificial. The contrived setups exploit vertiginous views and other, often dizzying complexities of organization, light and shadow, which demand a virtuosity superficially belied by occasional passages of seeming awkwardness.

This awkwardness derives not from bad design but from a painstaking attempt to render exactly what Mr. Pearlstein sees in front of him. "Optical truth reveals the lie of conventional schoolbook perspective," he has said. "Cézanne was right."

His new works are among his best in years. They're filled with subtle signs of optimism: a butterfly kite, the bright light of the Mickey sign, which casts a blue halo around the bodies of reclining models, like the nostalgic blue halos that Wayne Thiebaud casts around cream pies

and gumball machines. Multiple lights collapse space and make crisscrossing lines against bare white walls, bringing to mind Franz Kline.

A pair of large watercolors of models with whirligigs are remarkable feats, like the large painting in which a reclining model's legs thrust up from the bottom of the picture onto a transparent plastic chair. Mr. Pearlstein presumably standing astride her head. The mix of dry comedy, sex and theatrics is typical of him.

It's as if he's so endlessly excited by the problem-solving aspect of painting nudes that he needs each time to reinvent for himself the process from scratch, discovering its hitches and mysteries, like a musician who builds a piano whenever he wants to play. Morandi had his bottles and bowls. Mr. Pearlstein has his bodies and props. For him they have remained inexhaustible.

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

### Across the Trees

Romanian Art Now  
David Nolan Gallery  
560 Broadway, at Prince Street, SoHo  
Through April 21

The spare, grave display by the Romanian gallery Plan B was a standout at the recent Armory Show. Everything looked like eye candy beside it. Several of those artists are also in "Across the Trees" — a literal

translation of Transylvania — at Nolan, organized by the British art critic Jane Neal. Their work is as taciturn and compact as remembered, but with a vein of flipped-on-its-head zany shooting through.

Pencil drawings by Ciprian Muresan turn an Italian fable into a surrealist sitcom of patriarchal warfare, with a hapless parent tormented by preadolescent children. Miklos Szilard's sculpture called "Father" could be straight from the story: It's a man's beat-up winter cap with a bloody bandage on top.

Romania was ruled for decades by a Communist dictatorship, under which it was grindingly industrialized but also left chronically poor. Serban Savu's Hopperesque paintings of laborers and office workers, and Adrian Ghenea's landscapes obscured by gray dust, seem to speak of that dystopian time. No wonder the country produced a generation of Doubting Thomas artists.

Cristian Pogacean turns the idea into a sly joke in a video of Caravaggio's painting of the disbelieving disciple examining Jesus' wound. The only moving element is Thomas's wiggling, probing finger. Obviously art's vaunted power, like all other authority, has long since become suspect. This is the message of Mr. Muresan's photographic re-enactment of Yves Klein's famous, eternally suspended leap from a rooftop. In the new version the artist hits the

ground.

And in a video by Gabriela Vanga, creative ambition becomes a form of self-torment. The piece is a compilation of scenes from old "Tom and Jerry" cartoons, with the cat executing super-elaborate maneuvers to land his prey. But as the mouse has been digitally removed from the film, the efforts are for nothing. Even worse, they backfire. Ms. Vanga's piece may not quite qualify as black humor, but it is succinctly and agreeably grim.

HOLLAND COTTER

### Just Kick It Till It Breaks

The Kitchen  
512 West 19th Street, Chelsea  
Through April 28

This group show, organized by Debra Singer and Matthew Lyons of the Kitchen, is a textbook example of how political content operates in new art: in a slanting, unmonumental, coding-within-coding way that dodges ideology and trades earnestness for agile, deadpan wit.

References to past alternative cultures are frequent, but rarely nostalgic. Josephine Meckespeper's video "Rest in Peace" intercuts images of recent antiwar protests with an orgy scene from a 1960s hippie-lifestyle film, with shots of what appears to be a college discussion group attended by bored and fidgety students.