

A Demolition Derby of Art

By Tim Porges

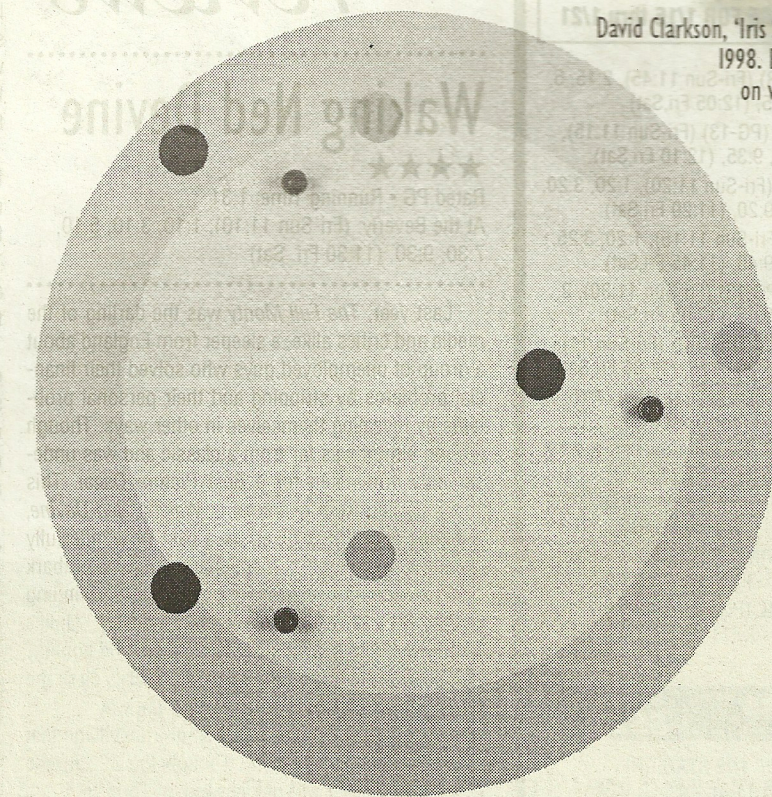
The experience of walking in on the Illinois State University Gallery's *Post-Hypnotic* exhibit is a sort of visual demolition derby. A bunch of old vehicles — Op, Arte Povera, psychedelia, post-modernism and so on — have been rehabilitated and turned loose on each other. It feels dangerous to get between them as they try to knock each other off the wall.

Some are more immediately aggressive than others. Mike Scott's neo-Op stripes actually repel the eye. The hallucinatory color that appears to hover over his surfaces becomes visible only when your eyes lose the battle and slip defensively out of focus. My own best guess about the difference between Scott's work (as well as Philip Taaffe's *Big Iris*) and the mid-'60s Op painters to whom it owes so much is that it's made for an audience that's willing to look at it longer than anyone ever looked at a Bridget Riley, an audience that expects more out of the experience than a headache and visual afterglow. We expect some kind of deeper reward, like the listeners who sat through the endless-loop repetitions of early minimalist compositions. Even in a survey presentation such as this, in which each artist is allowed no more than a single representative performance, we expect some kind of revelation, like the miraculous appearance of Elvis on a taco, but more abstract and less easily defined.

While the roots of this work go deep into the abstractions of 80 and more years ago, the baseline for its audience (in the Universal Boomer Time of contemporary culture) is to be found at mid-century, when Mom and Dad came home from the wars to live the Atomic life. While history (the original

abstraction) might repeat its tragedies as farces, art history's primal moments are always already nostalgic, already sturdily farcical in their self-awareness. The moments to which these paintings return us were all moments of recuperative nostalgia. I'm trying to define an edge here, between the two regimens of the art of our time (and maybe they were always there, but nowadays they're up on the surface where everybody can see them): the rule of novelty and the rule of nostalgia. For each of the artists in this show, either novelty or nostalgia offers a way of organizing your first encounter, and then there's the second-encounter switch-over, and you see the novelty that runs in constant parallel track with the nostalgia, making the work simultaneously dated and timeless, shocking and comfy, familiar and uncanny, repellent and attractive. And as your first look is followed by the second and third and so on, this back-and-forth viewing becomes part of the process, part of your repertoire of visual skills. It's a familiar skill, really. You've been developing it for years, playing computer games, puzzling out magic-eye images, reading *Ray Gun* and *Wired*, watching MTV. A little recreational drug-taking will take you there, too, though it's not a required part of the curriculum.

As with any demolition derby, the pure spectacle of this show is what it's really all about: the deafening roar of visual noise. The individual contestants (some old heroes from the instant movements of the '80s, some people still on the rising edge of their career curves) each has more to offer than pure spectacle, and like any good survey



David Clarkson, 'Iris Seventh Avenue Style,' 1998. Enamel and lightbulbs on wood, 48" diam. x 3."

show this one makes you want to see more by all of them.

Susie Rosmarin's grids push the vibrational, hypnotic potential of the grid to its limit without losing its history as a meditative space. Her paintings are like steroid-enhanced Agnes Martins, and that might not be to your taste (or mine), but I'd sure like to see more of them.

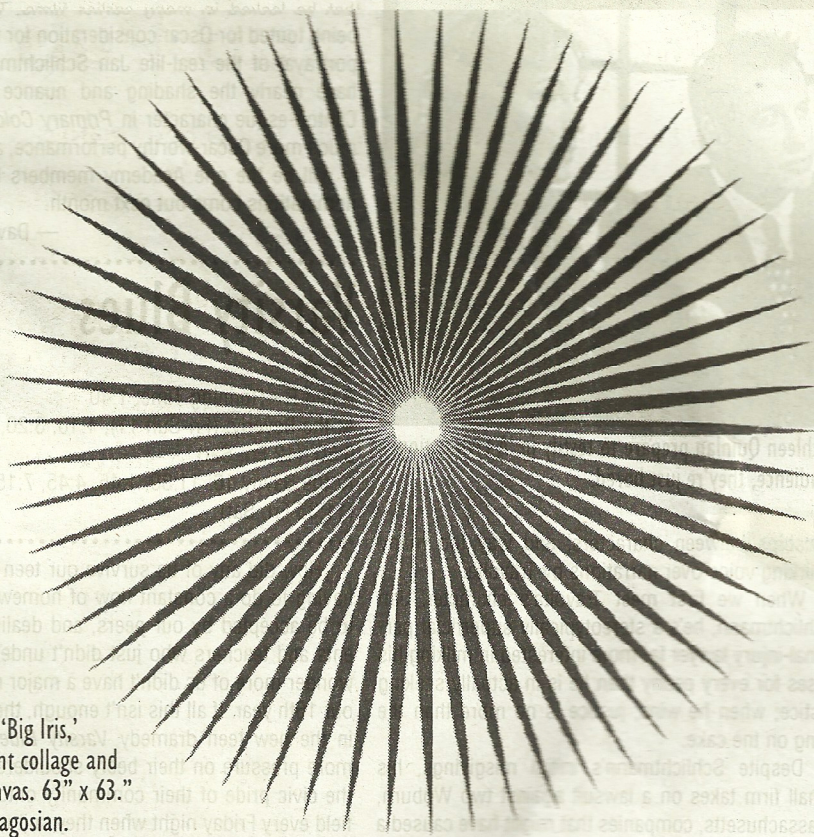
Tom Moody and Aaron Parazette both work along the edge between the most abject low art desktop computers can produce and a delicate, immaculate high-art sensibility. The abjectness of their materials (Moody's paintbox spheres and Parazette's clip-art splash forms) distances them from their conventional sources and makes their work interesting as well as seductive, though it's not what puts them on the menu here. There are weirdly passive-aggressive limits to the pleasure which Parazette's splash-fields provide (obsessively eager to please, but still a smart-ass: a hero of the moment), and there is an equally weird commitment to craft in Moody's quilted surfaces (as well as a graceful, subtle bit of homage to Jasper Johns), but they're on the wall here because this is a candy store, and they are here to be seen first and thought about later.

The primarily visual commitment of this collection allows a lot of visual punning to happen, in a good way. Tom Martinelli's dots don't have a lot in common with Yayoi Kusama's dots, but it's nice to see them in a show together anyway. Similarly, the off-registration bleed of color at the edges of Martinelli's dots resembles, but is conceptually miles and miles distant from, the illusory color-haloes produced by Scott's and Rosmarin's stripes, but it's nice to see them

together here, to get a feel for just how much distance that is. Similarly, on the most superficial of levels, Bruce Pearson's acid-Yantra bas-reliefs belong in the same show with James Siena's dense little folk-art Stella knock-offs, and even with Walter Robinson's you-can-do-it, simulationist folk-art spin paintings. But superficiality, the commitment to a surface that becomes the same thing as the picture plane (and then, click/click, is not) is a calling to which every painter must answer, though not always exclusively.

There are 28 painters in this show, and I don't have the space to even write about half of them. There's a frustratingly small taste of Jim Isermann's work here, and a couple of David Clarkson pieces that make me think that a whole show of just his work would tell me a lot more. There are also painters in the show, such as Michelle Grabner and Judy Ledgerwood, who don't deal primarily in visual satisfaction, and kind of get lost in the shuffle here, but are overwhelmingly impressive on their own turf. Oh, and there's a Peter Halley and a Ross Bleckner, some John Armleder prints and some of Fred Tomaselli's hemp-leaf and pill collages, and others — Mark Dagley, Stratton Cherouny, Steve Di Benedetto, Karin Davie — but this is the kind of show where the visual noise between the paintings is as much a feature as the names you read and try to remember. More, really.

Post-Hypnotic runs from January 14 through February 21 at the Illinois State University Gallery. A reception will be held Tuesday, January 19 (7 pm), and an artist's reception panel will be held Wednesday, January 20 (7 pm).



Philip Taaffe, 'Big Iris,' 1985. Linoprint collage and acrylic on canvas. 63" x 63." Courtesy of Gagolian.