

**THE RECOGNITIONS, curated by David Salle at THE FIREPLACE PROJECT**

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By Janet Goleas

When distinguished author William Gaddis released his first novel, The Recognitions in 1955, it outraged reviewers across the country and incited critical angst that ranged from detached respect to outright contempt. Now, some fifty years later, this complex tome is widely considered one of the great masterpieces of twentieth-century American literature. Currently, *The Fireplace Project* in Springs pays homage to this great work of fiction in an exhibit of the same name, curated by another American icon, renowned artist and Sagaponack resident, David Salle.

A panoramic work of dark satire, The Recognitions traverses a backdrop of fraud, forgeries and counterfeiting as Wyatt Gwyon, a frustrated painter, resorts to art forgery in the pursuit of truth and aesthetic beauty. As dozens of characters weave through this tale of entropy in the modern world, they pass through an elaborate web of literary allusions and exacting metaphors of authenticity and artifice, futility, cunning, madness and anarchy. In the end, Mr. Gaddis, who died at his East Hampton home in 1998, had created a classic that revolutionized language with its elastic narrative and sprawling structure. The works selected by Mr. Salle in this, his first curatorial venture since 1979, address some of the same themes employed in the landmark novel.

Four small sculptures by Gary Stephan are positioned on a large platform in the center of the gallery. Stark and rudimentary, the works are variously made of rocks, crushed tin foil, slices of cardboard and other scraps of daily life. Deceptively simple, the artist has sprinkled the pieces with black spray paint and dribbles of color. In Reservoir, 2005, watery blue acrylic paint has puddled up in the fragmented trough of what looks like an upended cereal box.

Hmmm. These works seem to possess none of the hallmarks of fine art. They're crude and provisional, as if clinging to the underbelly of meaning. Mr. Stephan recalled meeting a vendor in Mexico whose sole inventory was limited to an old piece of wood to which two rocks were connected by wires. "What is it?" asked the artist. "It's a stereo," said the man. "These are the speakers," he said, pointing to the stones. "I remember that moment," the artist said. "The lack of affect -- the truthfulness of that object and his belief in it -- it was unforgettable." He has sought that level of candor in his art since then.

Not unlike Mr. Stephan, the sculptures of Antoni Llena and Rachel Feinstein owe a debt to Italy's *arte povera*, one of that country's most significant art movements. Translated, the term means "poor art". It refers not to impoverished artists, but to a complete openness in the use and choice of materials that moves far beyond the conventions of oil paint, cast bronze or polished marble.

In Ms. Llena's sculpture, No. 1 (Ciego/De Luminas/Barba), 2006, a shred of green foam is balanced at the tips of two wedges of pine. At the top, an expanse of crackled packing tape careens down, cascading over torn paper to meet a finger-shaped bundle of rubber that lay at the edge of a tiny dead end. The results are surprising, as if the work has somehow transcended its own humility, which is considerable. Similarly, the bulbous plaster forms and hammer shapes in Ms. Feinstein's sculptures are ingenuous and ungainly. Slouched across pedestals or leaning nonchalantly on the floor, like the aforementioned they slip like a moving target in between meaning.

Also eschewing the hubris and monumentality of much modern sculpture, Vincent Fecteau makes models, structuring quasi-architectural forms from lowly materials such as foam core, papier mache and balsa wood. In Untitled, 2001, a slanted, boxy form is carpeted with burlap. Its angles rise to a convoluted top

that is punctuated with an empty roll of toilet paper and tongue depressor that stand at the edge like tourists peering over the black-top roof of an urban mastaba.

Likewise, Hans-Peter Feldman has explored under-valued aesthetic strategies such as vacation photos and family albums. Here, the artist assembled a wall of glossy photographs depicting blue sky and bright white clouds that examine and archive the conceptual side of collective memory. Jack Pierson, whose métier ranges from photography to drawings and word art, contemplates themes of isolation and melancholy, desire, eroticism and the legends of personal history. His Self Portrait #6, 2003, from a series first shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial, makes reference to a type of carnal fundamentalism a propos of personal longing and love.

Painters Suzanne Joelson and Amy Sillman explore interpersonal fictions. Ms. Joelson designs and produces handkerchiefs based on friend's faces. Only after they've been used and crumpled up do they become the subject matter for her abstract paintings. For Ms. Sillman, the narrative is more subliminal, as if she is exposing transient mental images that have been captured mid-thought. Shane Campbell wrestles his paint to the surface with muscular, writhing strokes and Maureen Gallace's landscapes are deliberate, contemplative and deeply intimate. In their own way, each of these artists is a storyteller, and like The Recognitions protagonist Mr. Gwyon, in pursuit of an ultimate truth of their own making.

Like the myriad characters that advance Mr. Gaddis's story through narration, the actors in Catherine Sullivan's mesmerizing video Chittenden Screen Tests, 2005 pass through layer after layer of emotional drama. The sixteen actors that populate the screen float across glossy wood-paneled offices and baroque living rooms in a hypnotic performance of twists and turns. At the root of each gesture and facial grimace is a level of contrivance that precisely measures emotional response like a musical notation, the emotive content floating by in double exposures and mirror images. Sensual, subversive and at the same time codified, Ms. Sullivan finds order a world of overwhelming disorder. Like the oscillations throughout the structure of Mr. Gaddis's first book, overlapping sequences meld together in a hypnotic mélange of personalities, language and desperate laughter.

Don't miss this provocative group show, on view through July 18<sup>th</sup>.

Janet Goleas