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WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS
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ART REVIEW



Fanciful to Figurative to Wryly Inscrutable

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SNAP out of it" is the word to the New York art industry after a couple seasons of fanciful, salable, boring painting and drawing. And judging by this summer's crop of gallery group shows, the art world is listening, at least enough to add a dose of conceptual fiber



to a high-carb bijoux diet.

Not that the situation has swung in any decisive direction. It's just become more complicated, which is good. Robert Smithson is giving Jack Smith a run for his money as presiding deity. Rock 'n' roll still holds the airwaves, but buzzed with a static of satellite news.

And in the face of the hard-sell campaign for a return to traditional values — Sincerity, Beauty, the Object — that has been the art establishment's sole contribution to 21st-century culture so far, some people are asking again: why can't irony be sincere? Why can't ideas be beautiful? Why pile glut onto glut? A few Chelsea galleries are even beginning to consider giving space to artists' ephemeral projects, which will pay off in credibility if not in cash, and may actually make art feel like an adventure rather than an uptight insider game.

Anyway, from a long list of group shows, I've picked a handful that give some sense of where the balance stands. Most are in Chelsea, though there's plenty of activity elsewhere. Young artists are to the fore — with so many art schools charging so much money to create careers, how could they not be? — though history gets a nod. Even when the temperature is high in July, the galleries tend to be cool, the personnel laid-back, the shows adventurous, all reasons why midsummer is my favorite art season.

The summer's big, hot Chelsea show is "Bridge Freezes Before Road" at Barbara Gladstone, organized by the writer Neville Wakefield. If you want an alternative to the mild-mannered artsy-craftsiness of "Greater New York 2005," you'll find it here. You'll also find a complement to the tough, exhilarating Smithson retrospective at the Whitney Museum. There is a single

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small Smithson piece at Gladstone: a collage of snapshots of the Nevada desert made in 1968, five years before his death at 35. And certain new work makes direct or indirect reference to him. The layer of salt caking a Banks Violette sculpture brings "Spiral Jetty" to mind. Matthew Day Jackson's "Tomb of the Unknown," with its carved vultures and tattooed surfaces, touches on Smithson's pop-cultural obsessions. And Smithson's signature concept of the "nonsite" gets a wicked spin in Aaron Young's "Freedom Fries," a video made by kicking a camera across the gardens of Versailles.

In a broader sense, this show is about the 1960's as a state of mind, then and now. This isn't the 60's as a feel-good love feast, but as a manic, heaven-and-hell trip that ended up raising consciousness so high — it actually afforded a glimpse of how political power worked — that an entire culture went into a nose dive, still in progress.

The young artists Mr. Wakefield has brought together here seem attuned to a falling-apart dynamic. Kelley Walker sugar-coats variations on Warhol's 60's "Race Riot" paintings with silk-screened images of fecal-brown chocolate. Dan Colen's graffiti-covered plank fort is for little cowboys who won't grow up. What does this Alamo protect? A package of Huggies diapers, fake audio equipment and a sculpture spelling the word "drugs." You have to laugh.

And for a wry, level-headed image of the 60's-style counterculture as a leftover artifact, there's Slater Bradley's video "The Year of the Doppelgänger." Just a few minutes long, it reduces the stadium rock concert — that empowering communal event of yesteryear — to a single skinny drummer banging out Led Zeppelin riffs as quarterbacks-in-training work out behind him.

I'll stop, though there's more to see: a Jasper Johnsian sculpture by Clive Barker from 1967; an impressive painting by the German artist Erik Schmidt; a sleeping-bag piece by Richard Hughes; a Chris Burden video; a crazy (which I like) mix of stuff from Adam McEwen. Each component is on its own track, but together they make a messy, anarchic show very different from what we've been seeing in Chelsea of late.



Above, Slater Bradley's "Year of the Doppelgänger" at Gladstone Gallery. Far left, a detail of Nobuo Nagasawa's "Nuke Cuisine" at Esso. At left, an untitled work by Wade Guyton at Friedrich Petzel.