

and underlying organizational structure—offering a lyrical retort of sorts to Mondrian's geometric grids. They also link him to a tradition of painterly abstraction stemming from Kandinsky's improvisations, as well as to Surrealist automatism. These late works suggest that Woelffer had long anticipated some of the neo-modernist concerns of certain younger abstract painters, including Sue Williams and Tomma Abts.

—Mark Van Proyen

Jamie Vasta at Patricia Sweetow

Imagine punked out Pre-Raphaelites up to no good and you have an idea of Jamie Vasta's meticulous paintings in acrylic and glitter on wood (all 2007). Tangled branches of leafless trees marble the backgrounds of scenes dominated by monumental, classically posed sleepwalkers and stalkers, killers and their victims. Kin to Rossetti's and Burne-Jones's elaborately staged allegories of sex and death, with their statuesque brooding maidens, Vasta's ambiguous narratives are melancholy and disturbing despite all the glitter.

In *Scarcely a Leaf Left on a Tree*, a woman kneels beside a handsome blue-eyed corpse, tenderly brushing his hair. Is she his lover, killer or both? Not only is she too old to play the part of the dewy maiden, but her hair—an asymmetrical boy-cut with red streaks—is all wrong for the period indicated by the painting's style. The woman who crawls on all fours across the foreground of *Feral* is shown in profile, her hairy wolf mask and sleeves, diaphanous white dress and heavy biker boots disjunctive enough to form a kind of *corps exquies*.

Like her Victorian forebears, Vasta dresses up her models and photographs them for reference, updating the process by bringing out its collaborative aspect:

the on-location interactions of the performers with whom she works take on a life of their own. Indeed, these paintings have the quality of film stills, of iconic moments found and frozen. Working from photographs also enables the artist to faithfully record every detail—the dappled violet sunlight falling through the branches onto a lace dress, pink-tipped fingers grasping a glistening dagger, the intricate underbrush—making the entire surface an embroidery of shifting, overlapping patterns. The grain of the wooden supports keeps the decorative rhythm going across occasional gaps.

Vasta's use of glitter evokes child's play, fairies and Disney—associations that prove deliciously at odds with the Blair Witch scenarios. Set amid tall golden reeds from which emanates an otherworldly light, *In the Rushes* shows two women suffocating a man kneeling between them, his hands bound in front, a clear plastic bag over his head. His head is turned, affording a view of his open mouth and anguished expression. White dresses and pigtails make the killers appear girlish before you notice the jeans and the biker boots underneath. It did cross my mind that the figure on the right, with a long knife at the victim's neck, might be cutting the plastic away, freeing him. Similarly, in the painting *Stepsister*, it is hard to tell if the two figures are embracing or wrestling. In manipulating us into being voyeurs, Vasta uses the oldest trick in the book, but it works for her every time.

—Melissa E. Feldman

MEXICO CITY

Gabriel de la Mora at OMR

Gabriel de la Mora is a 39-year-old Mexican artist who works in the conceptualist vein (often laced with humor or social commentary) that dominates much contemporary art production in his homeland. Within this esthetic-intellectual context, he has recently sought a recognizable formal vocabulary and an artistic voice of his own. As demonstrated in this first solo outing at OMR, one of Mexico's lead-



Shezad Dawood: *The Bestower*, 2007, neon and tumbleweed with aluminum plinth, 64 by 20 by 20 inches; at Paradise Row.

ing galleries for conceptual art, he appears to have found both.

De la Mora and Mexican artists of a similar ilk emphatically call attention to the post-Duchampian ideas prompting them, though a big challenge they face is how to allow their cleverness to shine while avoiding one-trick-pony gimmicks that afford little or no resonance. De la Mora meets this challenge, in part, through a fusion of method and material that has become one of his art's signature forms: "drawings" on paper in which he uses human hair instead of ink or pencil to shape his delicate lines (all works 2007). A superbly crafted work of this kind is *1951-G.M.25-1993*, a portrait depicting de la Mora's late father at age 25; *1965-G.M.39-2007* shows him again at 39. Both images are made of hair from the heads of de la Mora's father and siblings, and from the artist himself (whose head, nowadays, is shaved smooth).

De la Mora's investigation of identity as something defined through membership in family—a social unit particularly revered in Mexico—may also be seen in works like *Memoria III*, *24.10.07*, 57 sheets of paper presenting hair samples, signatures and computer-generated photographs of the skulls of 19 different de la Moras. The installation *Memoria II* featured motorized marionettes representing the artist and his immediate family. As the figurines gesticulated atop a platform, their shadows wobbled against a video image of themselves in motion that was projected on the wall behind them, creating a multilayered play

of forms the artist described in accompanying notes as another form of drawing.

The centerpiece of de la Mora's show was *39-G.M.C.-23.sept.07*, a solo-performance video. In it, with a long stick, he smashes a life-size piñata of himself. He strikes at this alter ego like a child at a Mexican birthday party, but as the colorful object falls apart, instead of releasing a cascade of candy treats, it spills painted-cardboard guts and torrents of red-confetti blood. Finally, de la Mora sweeps up its scraps and places them in a clear-acrylic box. This container and its contents stood near the monitors on which the video was screened.

The novelty and symbolism of de la Mora's recent works come wrapped

in ambiguity. Does his piñata-destroying act suggest a rejection of his Mexican identity even as his other works seem to embrace it—or, at least, to embrace the role of the Mexican family in determining his sense of self? In this mix of uncertain meanings lies poetry—enough to allow some of these latest works to jump the conceptual-art fence.

—Edward M. Gomez

LONDON

Shezad Dawood at Paradise Row

In his first major London show, "If I Should Fall from Grace with God," Shezad Dawood does not make didactic statements for, against or even about the war in Iraq. But the half-Indian, half-Pakistani, London-based artist's show of paintings and sculptures stands out as one of the most sobering meditations about clashing cultures to have emerged from London's politically engaged art scene. While Dawood employs religious references, he does not pit one faith against another or position Eastern religion in opposition to Western secularism. Instead, he juxtaposes two deeply ingrained sets of beliefs, one instilled by Islam and the other by cinematic myths of the American West.

A series of paintings of various sizes (all work 2007), set in vintage wooden frames, were hung seemingly at random on the gallery's black walls and lit from below like decorations in a dark-

Video of Gabriel de la Mora's performance *39-G.M.C.-23.sept.07*, 2007, piñata and wooden stick; at OMR.



ened saloon. They depict snarling soldiers, severed heads, old cowboys and woodland game, most of the images inspired by films in the cowboy genre (Dawood is a John Ford aficionado). In earlier paintings Dawood aspired to photorealism, but these, all featuring black backgrounds, are composed of intense, choppy brushstrokes and loose, thick lines whose feral quality helps convey the wildness of the West and the machismo of the cowboy persona. In contrast, four vitrines situated in the center of the gallery housed messy tangles of tumbleweed, through the branches of which Dawood wove colored neon Arabic letters that lit up the otherwise dark room. The graceful calligraphy, which relates to Islam's 99 Names of God, served as a counterpoint to the paintings of the West.

In the exhibition's press release, Dawood is described as seeking "a point of reconciliation between two seemingly diametrically opposed and yet, at present, fatally interwoven, cultural traditions." While he did not accomplish this ambitious aim, he illuminated an important point that is often overlooked in depictions of the toxic tensions between East and West. In his view, the Iraq war is

not a contest between modernity and its antecedents, or between a culture fixated on static abstract symbols and a slick, worldly society obsessed with the future at the cost of traditional values. Instead, he portrays a battle between two cultures' unyielding devotion to anachronistic systems of self-representation. America has a global reputation for being a fast culture with an adolescent disregard for its heritage. Yet the rugged resilience associated with its West still compels popular admiration. Rhinestones and riches, and new technology, have altered the reality of today's cowboys. But as Dawood demonstrates in "If I Should Fall from Grace with God," the myth of a lone, morally driven hero still resonates within American culture and represents it abroad, offering a telling comparison with certain aspects of Islam.

—Ana Finel Honigman

DÜSSELDORF

Martin Klimas at Cosar

In a plain and simple provocation, the young Düsseldorf photographer Martin Klimas blows bourgeois conventions to pieces. The

main objects in his pictures are arrangements of flowers in vases: tulips or carnations, orchids or amaryllis. They are always placed at the picture's center against a neutral background with neutral lighting and no shadows. It is all reminiscent of classical studio and product photography, with which Klimas is well acquainted. But with a spring-powered firing device, the artist aims at the vase, which bursts into a thousand pieces. He photographs on impact. Cosar displayed about 20 of Klimas's radical and elemental still lifes in two sizes and editions, all shot entirely with analog techniques—no digital manipulation.

It is a simple setup that at first glance suits a physics laboratory better than a photo studio. But with the help of high-speed exposures, we can see things in a way that is not possible for the human eye. The visual experience is frozen into an instant when standstill and explosion coexist, as, in many cases, the top of the vase has not yet moved: idyll above, catastrophe below. What emerges is a link between the beautiful and the perishable, static and dynamic, successive and simultaneous. Klimas, both playfully and with complexity,



Martin Klimas: *Untitled*, 2007, inkjet print, 31 1/2 by 23 1/2 inches; at Cosar.

describes the essence of form as transience. The aggressive gesture is unsettling, but through it, Klimas expands, not to say explodes, traditional art-historical concepts of the still life.

In several photos there is a minor flaw in the vase, such as a hairline fissure, that subtly mediates between the opposing halves. The delicacy of the fissure intensifies the brutality of the destructive gesture.

—Matthias Harder

Irwin

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tical panels, hung like paintings, felt less like a visceral event and more like a demonstration. The U-shaped installation of *Primaries and Secondaries* (2007) came across as inert and cerebral compared to the larger, more dynamic *Who's Afraid*. Five panels (two blue, one yellow and two red) faced a wall with five others (two green, one violet and two orange). A third, freestanding wall between them held three more panels, two white ones flanking a black. The relationship of the glossy white panels to the matte wall on which they hung brought to mind the raised stripes of the early line paintings. The white panels caused the central black one to come forward assertively. Visible through windows behind them, the city's red trolleys and silver and blue trains, passing on tracks just outside the museum, interjected lively horizontal stripes. Largely, though, the installation felt static. Colors didn't activate or vibrate but kept to themselves on their handsome, discrete surfaces.

Light and Space (2007), a fluorescent light installation, closed the show with a bold exclamation point. Irwin mounted varying lengths of white fluorescent tubes on clean white metal boxes across a roughly 20-by-50-foot wall. The lights formed stuttering, codelike dashes, angles and Ts, suggesting a diagonal grid but only fractionally articulating it. Their syncopated rhythm made the wall come alive in a dance of crisp luminosity and shadowy echo.

Clean and powerful, *Light and Space* paid equal homage to geometry and whimsy, order and spontaneity, predictability and chance. It married discipline and wonder. Harking back to the gestural energy in Irwin's earliest paintings, the piece also resonated with the mono-

Clean and powerful, Light and Space married discipline and wonder, activating the entire gallery with breathtaking, heady beauty.

chrome line paintings in its union of mark and field, and with the disks in its engagement of the play of light and shadow. Two of Irwin's esthetic mentors felt present in the work as well—Malevich, for his evocation of a realm of pure feeling; and Mondrian, for his plus-and-minus paintings, which are methodical yet fluid translations of matter into energy.

Light and Space was quintessential Irwin, activating the entire gallery with breathtaking, heady beauty. At 79, Irwin continues to refine his sensibility, staging opportunities for us to expand our capacities to see and experience what's before us. "Seeing," he has written, "is the initial act of valuing, and the nature and infinite potential of human beings to see and to aesthetically order the world is the one pure subject of art."¹ What is at stake in his art is also what is at stake in the wider world—our ability to perceive and to feel. □

1. Robert Irwin, "The Hidden Structures of Art," in *Robert Irwin*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993, p. 23.

"Robert Irwin: *Primaries and Secondaries*" opened at both venues of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego on Oct. 21, 2007. The portion of the show at the Jacobs Building closed Feb. 23. The remainder is on view at the museum's 1001 Kettner location through Apr. 13. The exhibition was accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with an essay by curator and museum director Hugh Davies, an interview with Irwin and a selection of Irwin's writings.

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