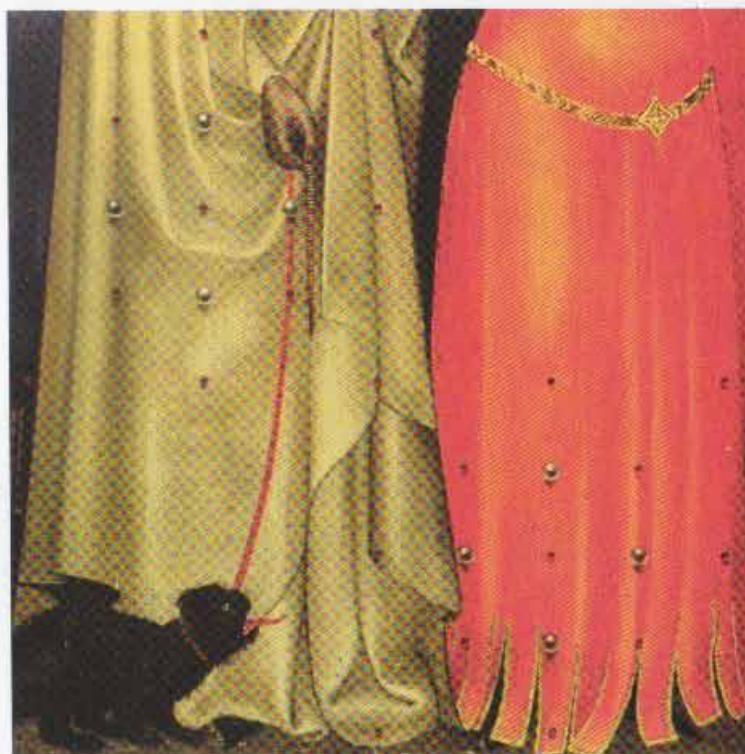


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Anne Connell *Wisdom & Ecstasy* 2001. Oil, gold leaf panel, 24 x 24 inches. Courtesy: Bridgewater/Lustberg Gallery, New York

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Gail Gregg and Anne Connell
Bridgewater/ Lustberg & Blumenfeld

By JOYCE KOROTKIN

Gail Gregg's minimalist encaustic paintings are a tour de force of sumptuous color, pattern and texture; within a reductivist construct of geometric abstraction, color field painting and emphasis on the spare elegance of surface.

Or are they?

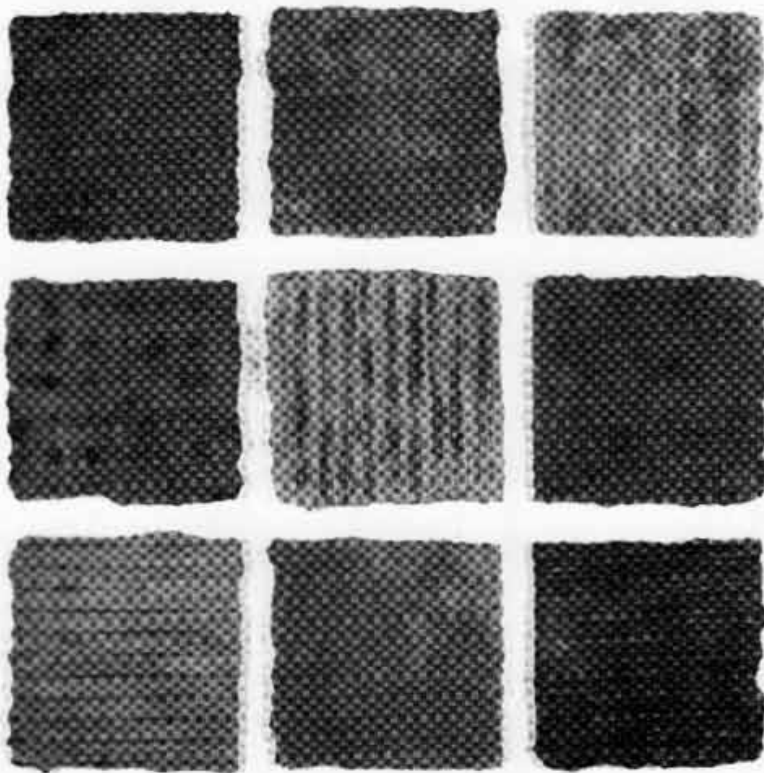
As the artist, critic and curator Alexi Worth notes, "every exhibition has a secret." In this exhibition, the secret fairly begs to be told, and Gregg lets it out in the form of a displayed notebook of preliminary photographs and sketches from which her paintings are developed. These images show aerial views of landscape; the land mass patterns as seen from an airplane as well as patterns inspired by Islamic tiles (in Morocco) which echo land divisions for crops. Every painting in the show derives from one of these sources. The works which therefore appear at first glance to represent and carry forward the traditions and concepts of Post-Modernism are actually quite literal representations of landscape, in a direct line of descent from the Renaissance.

The revelation comes as less of a surprise than one might expect, for hints are present in Gregg's use of the classical colors of Italian landscape painting; rich russets, olive greens and golden ochres; the colors of earth and the passing seasons.

A grouping of four russet-colored gridded paintings exemplify not only this but Gregg's witty affinity for the visual pun as well. These works; which allude to color-field painting with their emphasis on saturated, densely layered hues, lack of imagery and subtly differentiated patterns buried within the translucent wax layers, are in fact paintings of fields of color.

This visual word-play is borne out in other ways in other works, notably in the densely painted side edges of each panel, which transform the paintings into constructions not unlike squared chunks of sod; a punning riff on the earth of which the paintings are actually a representation. And in the use of encaustic, the medium itself being Gregg's most subtle dual reference; to both nature (the wedding of heat to beeswax and earth pigments) and as well to the seductive primacy of surface.

Anne Connell's exquisitely rendered small paintings examine the borderline between spiritual and material value. Laborious to create, and incorporating classical materials, such as gold leaf and silver point on meticulously prepared panels, they lift nearly-unrecognizable snippets of imagery from Renaissance paintings (such as skirt hems and stockinged feet) and elevate them to the status of the religious icons from which they originate. The reference to Christian iconography is implied rather than stated overtly, through the appropriations which come from such works as Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*. Connell combines these sources seamlessly with geometric patterns and designs, such as those found on ornate wallpaper. Various referents to random mundane items like shipping labels place the works squarely within a contemporary realm. The latter items are painted in the same style and with the same attention to detail as the appropriations, skillfully blended so that each image becomes an intrinsic part of the others.



Gail Gregg, *Steptoe*, 1999. Encaustic on paper 12 x 12 inches (each panel)
36x36 inches (total area).

Courtesy: Bridgewater/lustberg Gallery, New York

Souvenir is of particular interest; a diptych whose right panel has no images whatsoever, other than pearls, rubies and floating gems painted on a pure gold leaf ground. This work succinctly sums up Connell's examination of value. In this case, the gold leaf is inherently valuable, the gems are trompe l'oeil illusions that allude to value but that, like mirages and money, itself have no sustaining substance; and the painting itself signifies its selling price. These floating gems are a repeated motif in the appropriated-image works as well, pitting the spiritual value of the iconic originals against base monetary references. *The Worship of Obscurity*, for instance, which lifts a drapery detail from Benozzo Gozzoli's *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine and Saints*, clearly refers to the spiritual value inherent in the original's imagery, yet Connell reminds us that these icons were commissioned by wealthy patrons, were painted with gold and precious minerals; and were therefore actually somewhat profane.

Humbly small in scale, and occasionally shaped like altarpieces themselves, Connell's miniatures demand quiet contemplation on the nature of reverence. ♡

Gesture, Posture and Bad Attitude in Contemporary News Photography Apex Art

By LILY FAUST

In his film, *True Stories*, David Byrne creates a storyline by piecing together disparate stories found in various newspaper articles. Similarly, in *Gesture, Posture and Bad Attitude in Contemporary News Photography* Byrne curates an exhibition of news photos taken by photojournalists, and displays the photographs in a manner which can be read as a choreographed performance. The performance is one of acculturated gestures, typical of world leaders or political persona; Pope John Paul and President Clinton touching heads in a secretive exchange, followed by President Bush shaking hands with the South Korean President, (and smiling at viewers by way of the camera) with shots of other presidents, mayors, and assorted public figures engaged in exemplary behavior. Leaders smile, /click/ a pen- sive candidate holds his head, /click/ a mayor and a millionaire express opinions with open hands, /click/ two Chinese leaders share a joke hidden by hands concealing mouths, /click/click/ while people, demonstrators, protesters and victims, sandwiched between the leaders on both ends of the exhibition, are dragged, grabbed, confronted and ultimately changed by the executive decisions from the top. A loaded spectacle, for sure.



David Byrne *Gesture, Posture and Bad Attitude in Contemporary News Photography* 2001. Installation
Courtesy: Apex Art, New York

These are news photographs by fourteen photojournalists, among whom are Harry Hamburg and David Handschuh, of the New York Daily News and Srdjan Ilic, of AP/Wide World Photos. As David Byrne states in the exhibition brochure, concerning news photos, "Self-expression and artistic license are kept to a minimum." The ideological biases of editors do not come into the picture as readily as they would in the written medium. The photographs, although crisp in contrast and detail, are not taken with aesthetic considerations. Byrne uses the documentation of these photographs to create a simultaneous gathering of disparate events, reflecting his point that a grammar of stereotypical body language is revealed through repetitious appearance.

De-contextualizing the photographs from the articles, Byrne is able to focus the viewer's attention on the political figures in the photographs. In this collage of contemporary scenes culled from the news media, (from 1992 to the present) one becomes aware of the repetition of certain hand gestures, smiles and body language that become tools in convincing and possibly obfuscating the public. As Byrne calls this display, "a dance of politics," the viewer becomes aware of the visual language that is employed in enacting a possible drama; whose acts are staged, once again, in the gallery.

Oddly enough, when we give up puzzling over the deeper significance that Byrne attributes this group of images, and surrender to the formal content of the photographs, there is still a great deal to be perceived. The adult bravado of a cigar smoking East Asian boy, or the apparent fear of two Palestinians under Israeli fire, moments before they are hit, give visceral credence to photographs that lack credibility in the photographs of politicians. It is the contrast, as depicted in the news photos, of the choreographed versus the natural, the polished versus the raw that make this exhibition truly worthwhile. ♡