

# NEO-SURREALISM: HAVING IT BOTH WAYS

Austé, The Fair Palaces of Heaven, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 49 1/2 x 76". Courtesy Tracey Garet Gallery.

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To date, Neo-Surrealism has given every indication of becoming a non-movement. Despite the recognizability of Surrealist trademarks, and the individual popularity of some of its most gifted practitioners, it seems destined to achieve a measure of internal art world importance without necessarily challenging expressionism for the crown.



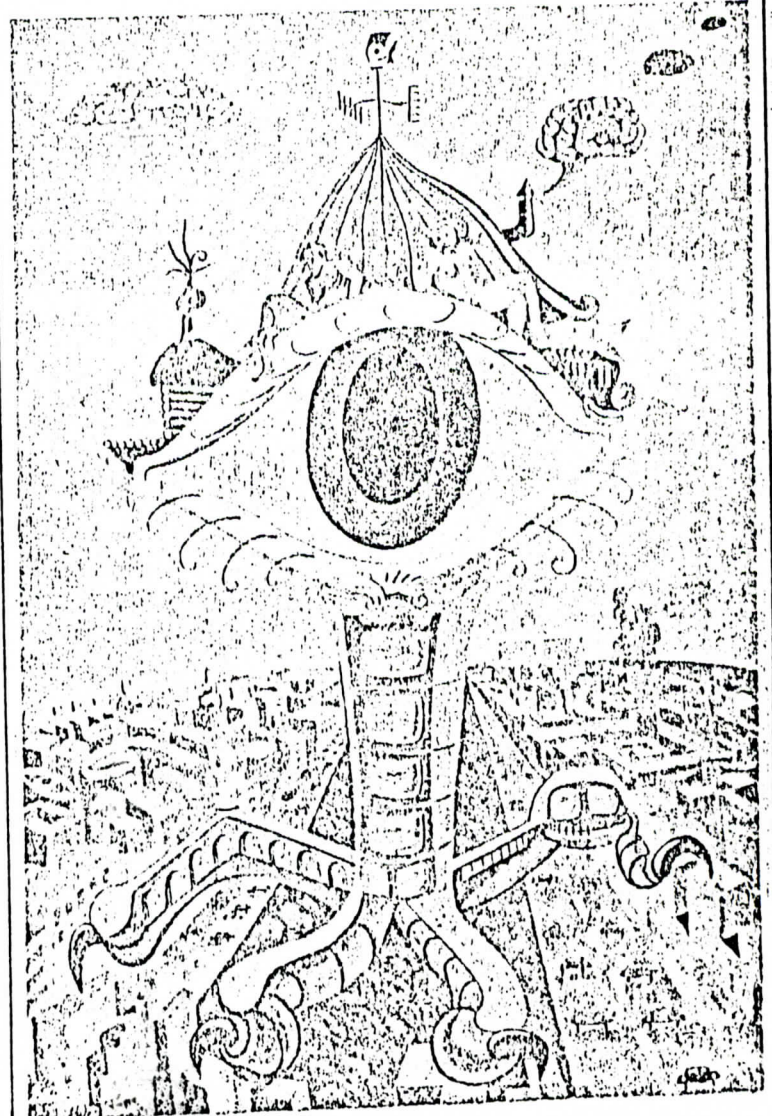
Not all art movements require a consensus of opinion to achieve their goals. Certain clusters of artists, whose mutual similarities only become apparent under the forced cohesiveness of a label, seem able to resist the total dissemination of their work into a trend. In other cases the label sticks, but may lead the viewer to conclude erroneously that the artists concerned share a common point of departure.

To date, neo-Surrealism has given every indication of becoming a non-movement. Despite the recognizability of Surrealist trademarks, and the individual popularity of some of its most gifted practitioners, it seems destined to achieve a measure of internal art world importance without necessarily challenging expressionism for the crown. In the event, however, that neo-Surrealism becomes a contender, it is difficult to imagine its late followers developing variations on the common themes that can approach the innovations created so far. For a non-movement to produce artists with the importance of many current neo-Surrealists, the local bandwagon must be kept under lock and key for as long as possible. If for no other reason, the best neo-Surrealists have now had an opportunity to develop their visions without the added hindrance of growing up in public.

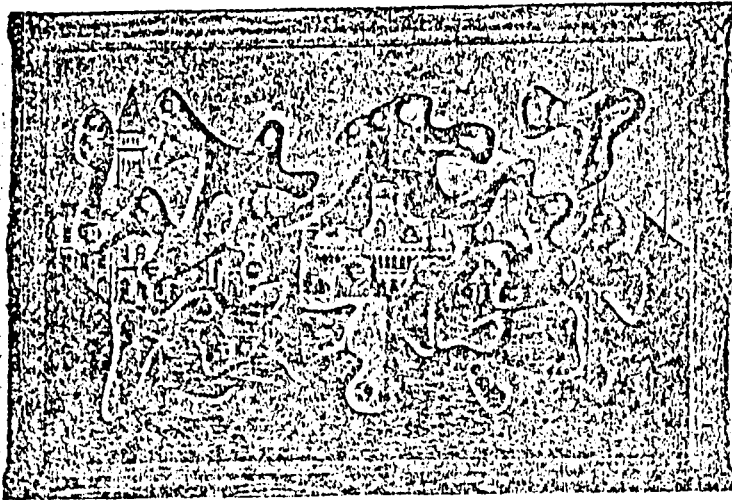
Although neo-Surrealism has come about without nationalistic apron strings, recent German painting has served as a sympathetic backdrop for its emergence. A number of mid-career expressionists, especially Lupertz and Immendorff, had provided a framework for evocative symbolism and illusionistic contours as early as the mid-1970s. A fully conscious exploration of recognizable surreal material did not occur until a few years later, with the first mature works of Jiri Doukoupil and Milan Kunc, both Czechoslovakian nationals who have since relocated in West Germany. Their work in particular ties the brooding pessimism of expressionist content with a cartoonish imagery that half-belies its unblinking scourge of political totalitarianism. Against the panoply of German expressionism, the works of Doukoupil and Kunc stand out with greater coherence than the comparatively derivative paintings of Mittendorf and Felting, and they seem to have become the proper heirs to the pattern of innovation begun by Baselitz, Polke, and Penck a decade ago.

In the United States, there are many more threads to weave together in pursuit of neo-Surrealism. Perhaps the most vital, albeit unexpected, source has been the late work of Philip Guston and its dissemination through the movement once known as "New Image

Milan Kunc, Untitled, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 92 x 62". Courtesy Pat Hearn Gallery.





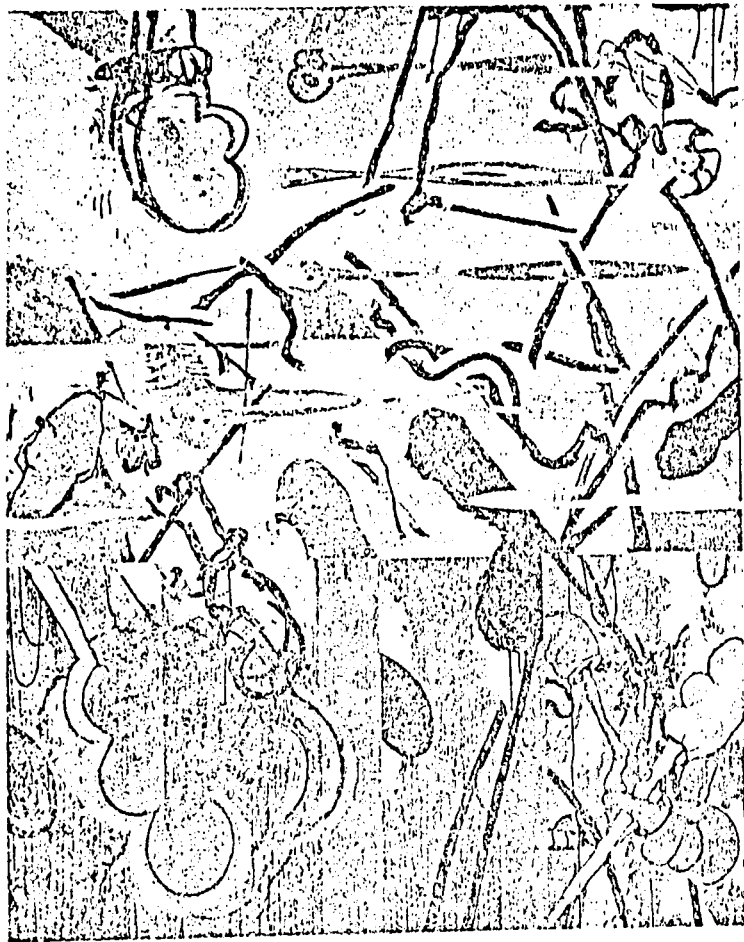


Painting." The return of imagery to gestural painting was a hesitant step, with the 'carved' impastoes and dreamlike imagery of Lois Lane, for example, occupying roughly the same formalist position as the effulgent gestural mannerism of Jedd Garet. Yet it is Garet who has spawned the endless parade of imitators, in part through the energetic hedonism of his colors and handling, but even more through his casual appropriation of source material from de Chirico, Man Ray, and other Surrealist pioneers. Nevertheless, with most of the attention in 1980 going to expressionism's revival, it was easy to overlook Garet's dandified unconscious. At least until Kenny Scharf came along.

Kenny Scharf has, among other things, made neo-Surrealism popular through his bold hybridization of Surrealism and Pop. By launching his Jetsons into outer space, not to mention challenging the paintbrush's hegemony through his skillful manipulation of the spray can, Scharf reversed the equation whereby Surrealism used automatism to make the invisible visible. Instead, he made the mundane fantastic, thus circumscribing the Surrealist method into a studio technique that left both subject and treatment completely idiomatic, fully lacking in psychological nuance. Within his short career, Kenny Scharf has commandeered an entire vocabulary of 'subconscious' material, with his sole aim being the creation of an art that revels in superficial optical pleasure.

If Scharf's and Garet's work has set the tenor of neo-Surrealism without failing entirely within its domain, it has done so by indulging the peculiarly American appetite for visual gluttony. The most casual glance at 1930s Surrealism indicates a cadre of radical aestheticians whose links to Victorian morality allowed them free reign to dialecticize between repression and indulgence of the viewer's libido. Not uncoincidentally, few of them are noted for achievement in the realm of color, which would in fact have inhibited their goal of moral radicalism by de-literalizing the all-important imagery. By contrast, most of the neo-Surrealists seem to have created a genre which heralds the return of color to the forefront of painterly concerns.

Like Kenny Scharf, Peter Schuyff epitomizes the lingering 'have-style-will-travel' situational aesthetics of post-graffiti. His most swashbuckling series to date, faded academic canvases given the biomorphic once-over, has more or less come to a close, although he has been known to venture out past the canvas' edge to paint furniture and other accoutrements. But for the most part, Schuyff plays clinical aesthete to Scharf's pied piper, delving into the formal variations of Biomorphic Op with the decisiveness of a true strategist. Both artists achieve a surface glow that recapitulates the sheen and shimmer of early Futura and Lee. This is the antiseptic envelope that completes the mystic circle of audience-directed art objects: you can't trace the artist's hand, only his mind.



Perhaps more self-consciously than any East Village artist since Keith Haring, Schuyff is going for the Big Time. His paintings represent a carefully rehearsed moment of future art history which is quite distinct from personal stylistic evolution; with luck, Schuyff's pictures will continue to recede into prominence without the intervention of the present moment to force the artist into self-confrontation. He has not yet shown the stylistic resourcefulness of Scharf or David Salle, but then few artists have attempted to single-handedly save abstraction with the fervor that Schuyff is putting out.

Ostensibly, Peter Schuyff is easier to categorize than his contemporaries, in part because he has formulated an instantly recognizable picture. Working with the fewest possible colors, the artist develops a deep, illusionistic space that is either glimpsed through masklike openings in a frontal plane or forms a vaporous backdrop hovering behind the central shape. Complexities within the figure are inversely proportional to the amount of detail in the background, and vice versa. The figures themselves are meticulously cribbed from a Surrealist handbook: references abound to Tanguy, Ernst, Landes Lewitin, Wilfredo Lam, even Henry Moore and Matta. Yet it is his rendering of the smooth, even, low-relief physicality of his shapes that gives Schuyff's paintings their delectability and their radicalism. It is also within this narrow margin of anamorphic contour that Schuyff edges toward full sensual painterliness. He has lent emblematic power to abstract shapes by pushing them to the verge of representation, and now gently counterpoises their smooth opacity with a teasing painterliness.

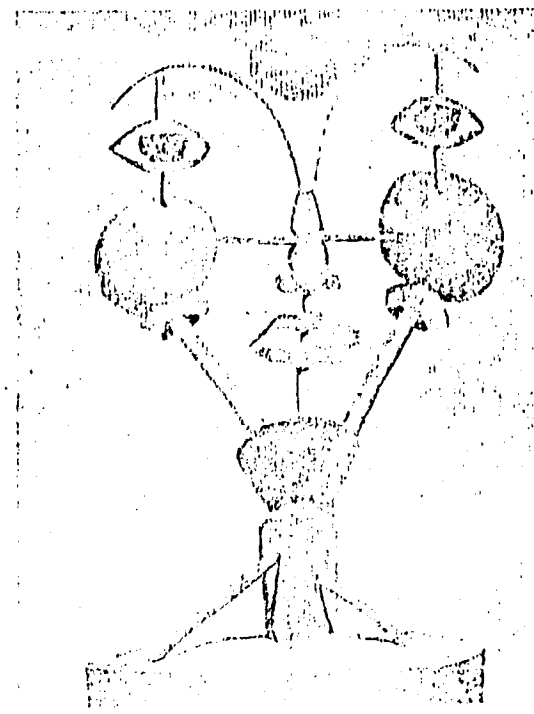
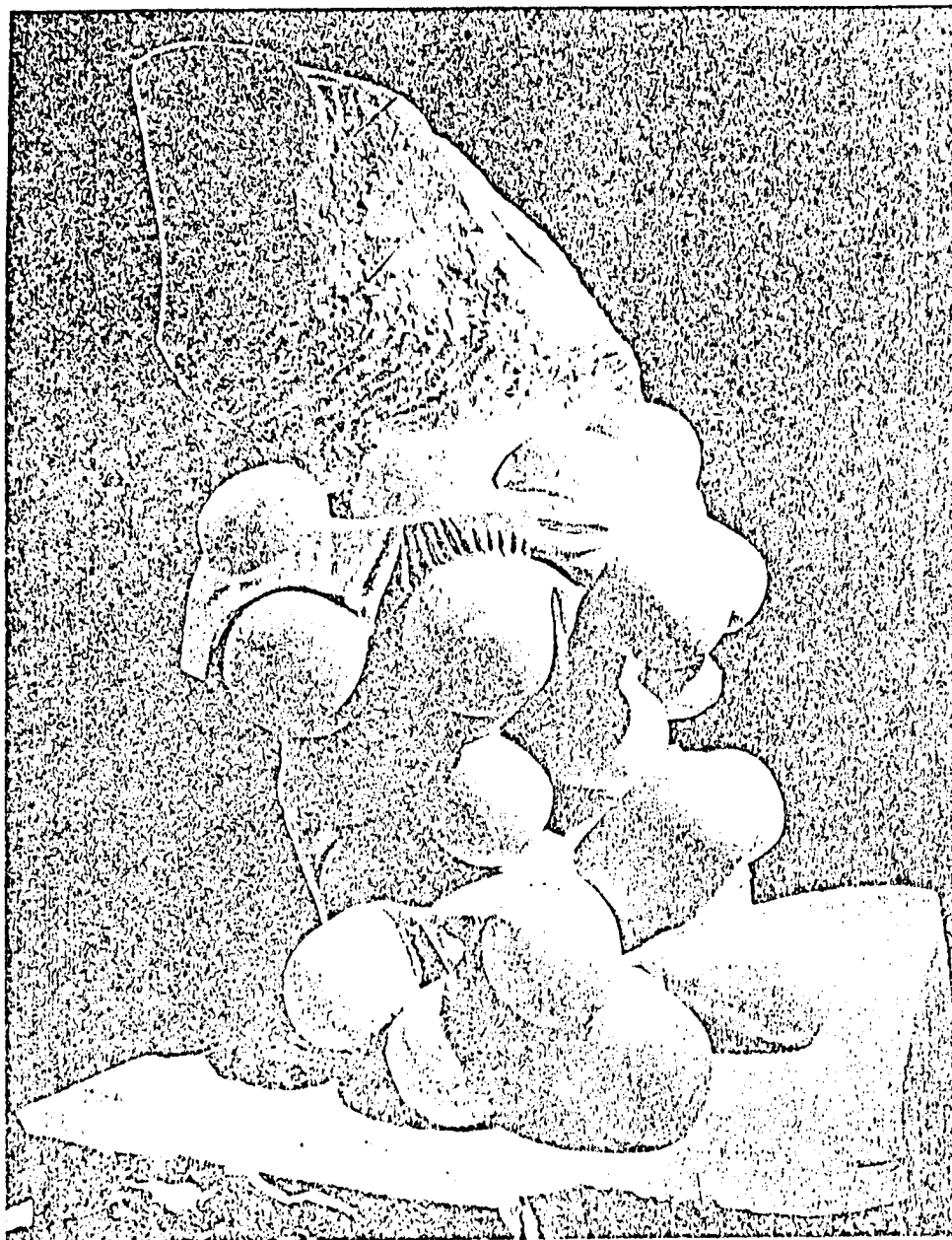
In contrast to Schuyff, Carroll Dunham has managed to develop an equally painterly approach which encompasses a broader range of figural material and fewer of the kitsch overtones that are inevitable within Schuyff's program. In fact, Dunham's art, while less overtly



sensationalistic than Schuyff's, may in fact offer a more viable path for future abstractionists to follow. Like Schuyff, the figural activity within Dunham's paintings is suspended over a paucity of illusionistic space, but its treatment is not uniform. Subtle distinctions of area and mass lend a shifting quality to Dunham's backgrounds, which are somewhat schematized by the artist's adoption of vertical lines that characteristically divide the picture plane into two or three sub-quadrants. The resultant internalized spaces lend the surface plane an additional sense of compression, creating a shallow, tableau-like stage which can be subdivided into specific painterly incidents without further isolation of individual shapes.

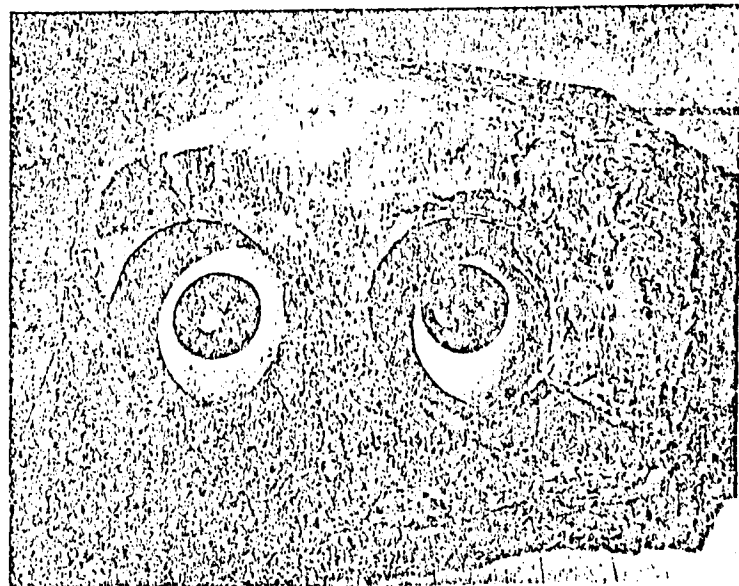
Dunham's use of shape is perhaps his most startling characteristic. Culled more from the early 1940s Surrealist vocabulary of such proto-Abstract Expressionists as Rothko, Gottlieb and Bazioles, Dunham makes a highly eloquent case for the endless potential of contemporary biomorphism. Each stroke and gesture is allowed an individual life, but when concentrated into solitary forms they attain a highly ordered sense of detail that brings the shape into remarkable clarity. Like Scharf, Dunham also deals in a post-liberationist automatism; vulvular of phallic images are not left suggestive, but coaxed into anatomical exactitude. Although the paintings are defiantly abstract, they suggest a biological microcosm, a teeming universe where distinctions between life forms are based largely on relative scale and ferocity.

In keeping with other concerns of neo-Surrealism, Dunham shares with Schuyff and Scharf an extraordinary control of color. It would be interesting, in fact, to survey the field of color abstraction a few years from now to determine whether the implications of Dunham's and Schuyff's work had made themselves completely felt. They have



George Condo, A Woman is Equal to the Sum of her Parts, 1983. Oil on canvas, 68 x 59". Courtesy Pat Hevern Gallery.

Louise Bourgeois, Nature Study, Velvet Eyes, 1984. Marble, 26 x 33 x 27". Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.



distanced themselves as far as possible from naturalistic hues and tended instead for programmatic or applied colors, which are played off against each other with glaring alacrity. Both painters knowingly adopt the language of bad taste, but their elegant manipulation of its conceits is only further evidence of their slavish devotion to the betterment of painting. As if to further the pretended outrage, both artists' knowledge of the decorative is highly acute, and each uses his knowledge as a decoy, to undercut a sense of beauty with a flair for shock value.

The figurative neo-Surrealists are less difficult to isolate than their abstract counterparts, and in the case of neo-Expressionism an argument could be made for Surrealist tendencies, latent or otherwise, in the work of practically any painter or sculptor. This has come about largely because of neo-Ex's tendency to isolate the human figure while attributing to it a gamut of emotional tension. In such a limited spectrum, it is easy to discern numerous quasi-surreal traits that were never intended by the artist, or were meant to be as ambiguous as possible.

Austé is a painter whose work played an important part in acclimating the art world to expressionist tendencies before they had become fashionable. Today, five years after her first gallery ap-

pearance, Austé's work is clearly unalloyed with the expressionist ethos that it helped to spawn, while her status as a Surrealist is becoming more apparent. A native of Chicago, Austé's unmistakable sensibility developed quite early, fueled in part by the rich tradition of Surrealist-derived imagism there, a tradition that she ushered into the 1980s with her unprecedented use of poetically crude draftsmanship to bring to life a startling race of wraithlike, occult women who like nothing more than whispering incantatory spells from a moonlit riverbank.

The last couple of years have witnessed a heightened power in Austé's work, a process which mandated the transposition of her drawings into paint. Working at first with blocky areas of color interspersed with translucent washes, she has slowly acquired a sense of abandonment in her brushstroke which complements, instead of remaining subordinate to, her imagery. Austé's bizarre use of line to describe her anorexic heroines is another beneficiary of her recent painterly facility.

David Humphrey, who has only recently attempted the same unrestricted handling, tries to wed several disparate sources in his newest work. Working with chunky cartoonish forms and a scumbled surface reminiscent of Guston, Humphrey's imagery is more textbook-derived than Austé's, opting for a stagier tradition of Surrealism much dependent on Magritte, Dali, de Chirico, Delvaux, and Carrà. Yet Humphrey's strength is most evident in his adoption of a domestic, genre-like tension which is clearly his own. His figures address each other with an oblique air and stilted behavior, factors which lend a somber note to his more hallucinatory passages. Humphrey is also able to derive great benefit from his uncluttered, even reductivist, compositions, which serve to heighten the sculptural capacity of his forms.

In Humphrey's case, and in that of George Condo, the suppressed sexuality that 1930s Surrealism tried to free is again breaking out of an imposed set of moral restrictions. When evident in mid-1980s painting, the overripe effulgence of Surrealist imagery is prone to a camp or artificial edge, one that can also be interpreted as a tacit recognition of the moral and political conservatism currently making itself felt in America. Of all the neo-Surrealists' work, Condo's has the bleakest edge to it, a dank humor that goes well with his flamboyant virtuosity with paint. Condo seems to be the artist who can singlehandedly bring the shunned excesses of late Dali back into vogue, for he pushes his imagistic distortions to a comparable plateau of biologic impossibility.

Condo, in addition, possesses a more restless imagination than most of his contemporaries, preferring to adopt the vestiges of many painterly styles rather than merely borrow their imagery. Although his touch rarely changes, he experiments with a wide range of color and compositional systems. Indeed, one of his strongest traits, also visible in Salvador Dali's work, is his dramatic use of disproportionality to achieve some of his quirkiest transformations.

Thierry Cheverney and Steven Pollack each finds his source material in the Surrealist landscape, a loose tradition that links the Romantic visions of Bocklin or Friedrich with the fantastic "frottage" paintings created by Max Ernst a century later. Cheverney is the noteworthy colorist of the two, mixing the effects of a full palette with a more or less improvised range of distended images. Both artists prefer a middle-distance perspective which helps infuse their scenes with an overall liquidity and mystical air.

Jiri Doukoupil and Milan Kunc have recently arrived at unusual stages in their work. Doukoupil appears to have opted for a low-burn frenzy in his physical treatment that contradicts the glossy surfaces of his more menacing early work. In his efforts to avoid sweetness, he is sometimes guilty of neglecting the full expressive potential of the images he invents. On the other hand, his wide influence seems even to be felt in the work of such older artists as Francesco Clemente, whose highly charged figures have become invested with a biomorphic occultism that seems out of line with his earlier work, yet serves as an improvement on it.

Milan Kunc, on the other hand, shares the gleeful, mock-optimistic stance of Kenny Scharf to boost the irony of his mature paintings. Kunc's narrative imagination is also not dissimilar to Humphrey's, in that both artists nonchalantly play out their fantasies against a suspiciously peaceful thumbnail sketch of the world.

Yet the underlying disharmony depicted in Kunc's work is always hard to mistake. His humor, as macabre as Doukoupil's, is more exhilarating because of Kunc's consistently light touch with his often inflammatory subjects. Like the neo-Expressionists, Kunc and Doukoupil have an awareness of their political role as avant-garde artists, an awareness that can lead to a double edged sense of stylishness that both artists use to their advantage. In contrast, the American neo-Surrealists' political self-awareness ventures no further than a coy acknowledgment of the commodity value of their paintings, a limitation that makes one appreciate the underrated Pop-surreal-political works that Peter Saul has been producing over the last decade.

Finally, the recent sculpture of Louise Bourgeois underscores, among other things, the extent to which the goals of Surrealism have changed in half a century. Bourgeois' quest, like that of the Paris school, centers on an unknown quantity, a core of revelation that lies at the far end of the artistic process and deep in the substance of the artist's materials. Sometimes Bourgeois' imagery can feel programmatic to the viewer because her exploration of unified biological form remains her only subject. Yet it is, in the traditional sense of the word, a 'great' subject, one which never ends because it is so carefully entwined with the artist's changing psyche.

This comparison is apt in light of the mannerism, even opportunism, which many viewers find evident in much neo-Surrealistic work. It is, in the '80s tradition, an appropriated style, one which entertains no allegiance to its purist forerunners. With no bourgeois taste to insult, painters are now deemed popularly offensive by the extent of their market research. Yet this ignores the greater implications of this recent variation on neo-style, and its possible long-term effects.

Why has Surrealism found this moment to reappear as an acceptable style? The answer comes neither from the cyclical appropriations of postmodern stylistics ("somebody had to do it"), or from the tenuous state of current global politics (both Surrealism and neo-Surrealism systematically evoke fear of a world war), although both factors have had an influence. Perhaps the key to understanding neo-Surrealism is its unabashed disdain for primitivist conceits. The flailing emblems and slashed pictograms of neo-Expressionism have recently attained a negative status among many young artists, who enjoy the anarchistic tendencies of know-nothing exhibitionism but find the pictorial results on the boorish side. "To make everything new again" is the smiling credo behind Stephen Westfall's Woolworths send-ups of Brice Marden and David Novros, or Gretchen Bender's bulletin board pastiche of current art trends. The neo-Surrealists don't quite make it happen *again*, but they are the first to cunningly exploit the *nostalgic* possibilities of Freud and Jung, a nostalgia which Minimalism has not yet attained.

Take, for a starting point, the reinterest in late, previously discarded de Chirico and Picabia. Soon this will spread to reembrace Delvaux, late Dali, Masson, Kurt Seligmann, Romaine Brooks, Hannah Hoch (special status as an overlooked Dadaist), even George Tooker. Some think Tanguy and Kay Sage are due for a revival, but I remain skeptical. Max Ernst now seems to have become one of the truly seminal figures of the 20th century, and Florine Stettheimer is surely almost due for another time around. If they can be re-discovered with such a vengeance, then they have crossed over: time barrier into the antique (not the neo-Classical but the flea-market connotation), the nostalgic. Melting watches are certainly a lovely taken down from the attic as an old barber's pole, but they are every bit as cliché-ridden as well.

This is the point. Surrealism is a guilty pleasure, after Pop maybe the guiltiest. Kenny Scharf, prophet of Pop Surrealism, and Pete Schuyff, avatar of Op-Surrealism, exploit this factor to its utmost by handing in paintings that reek of uncontrolled hedonism. By swinging the pleasure pendulum from camp-ugly to camp pretty, they are acting as 100% politically correct cynics. Gluttony and banality can not coexist easily, so Pop/Op Surrealism skirts the latter entirely. The connoisseur, who is just thawing out, and the pedestrian, who is just catching on, are reportedly appalled by this work. But they overlook the rarefied air surrounding these comic paens to indulgence only at their own risk. For a non-movement, neo-Surrealism has a long way to go.