

PRIMAL DREAMS

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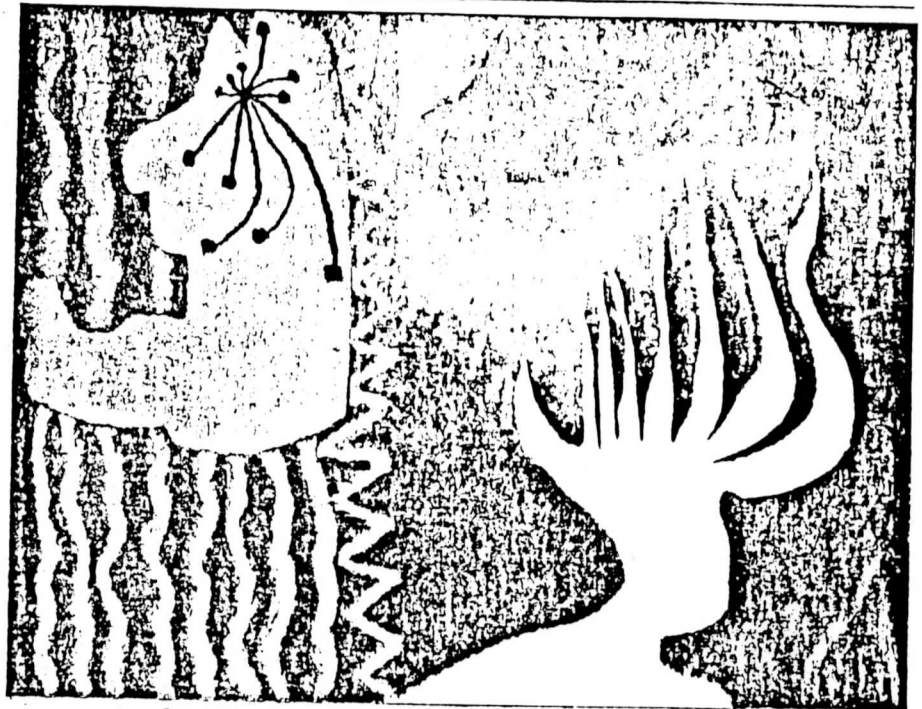
“...A curious upheaval of taste has resurrected Baziotes; Scharf is clearly the best of the urban-punk wing...”

“TO BE INSPIRED. THAT IS THE THING,” wrote William Baziotes in 1948, borrowing a Shakespearean turn of phrase. “To be possessed; to be bewitched. To be obsessed.” Following his own instructions, Baziotes concocted a version of American Surrealism that had as many lumpy components as the stew in the Cawdor witches’ cauldron: a hunk of Miró, a dollop of Picasso, a chunk of Klee, and the eye of an Abstract Expressionist, all floating in a thin soup of diluted myth.

Though he was a leading figure in the early years of the New York School, and showed next to Jackson Pollock in Peggy Guggenheim’s legendary gallery, Baziotes fell from grace in the 1950s. When Pollock and friends turned away from European influences, toward an abstraction rooted in the awesome rhythms of the American landscape, Baziotes’s connections to Surrealism must have seemed like a hindrance, a foot-dragging resistance—after World War II, almost unpatriotic. He died in 1963, already a shadowy entry in the textbooks.

Now, suddenly, one of those curious upheavals of taste that occur so often these days has resurrected Baziotes. Nineteen of his works from 1952–62 have been gathered into an exhibition at Blum Helman Gallery. They look miraculously topical. You don’t see the Surrealism so much anymore; what you do see is the obsession, the possession, and the inspiration.

Baziotes’s works of the 1940s wove together dark Surrealist monsters, Cyclopes, and various rude beasts in a web of black, stolid forms. Around the early fifties, the paintings lost their sense of movement and their ponderousness and became static, ethereal, and spooky, as though the artist had set out to invoke the ghost of Jung in every primordial image. In the works at Blum Helman, a vague fog pervades each scene—a chalky, semi-opaque mist of pearlescent yellows, salmons, beiges, glacial greens, spruce blues. The fog is of the sort a time machine might travel through. Primeval beings of unspecified genealogy drift about in it to uncertain purposes. Baziotes spent long hours in the Museum of Natural History, and you sense that some of these images are near-quotations.



Quotation from the jungle: *The Flesh Eaters*, by Baziotes.

For instance, *The Flesh Eaters*, contains floating ribbons that could be jungle plants or protoplasm, lines that could be petroglyphs or hieroglyphs, a cockatoo’s crest that could be a dinosaur’s rib cage or a savage’s war-bonnet.

The stifled anxiety in these twilight scenes—the dank smell of the forest primeval, the sense of halted time—suits the slippery neologizing of painting in the 1980s. A modern American Surrealism is currently in the research-and-development phase, and Baziotes has much to contribute. Now that his European ties bind less painfully, you can see how Americanized these late paintings are. Baziotes, like Barnett Newman or Pollock, succumbed to that American habit of taking an experience and making something bigger out of it, something closer to the sublime. He eventually found his mythic landscape. Though it’s not as heroic or as brilliant as Newman’s or Pollock’s, it’s genuine. Unfortunately, no one noticed, because he found it too late, while everyone’s gaze was turning toward hard-edge geometry and pop. (20 West 57th Street; through March 31.)

I THOUGHT ABOUT BAZIOTES WHILE TRYING to make sense of the uningratiating antics of Kenny Scharf. In one of Baziotes’s drawings from the 1930s, he created a bug-eyed, snout-nosed pigman with one fist raised in an angry gesture against a paint-speckled starry void. Baziotes’s grotesque gnome has a surprising resemblance to the button-nosed, bug-eyed, rubbernecked Fred Flintstone characters that parade through Scharf’s spray-painted tropical beach scenes. Is there a connection? Doubtful. Is there an affinity? Definitely.

Scharf is 26, and four years out of the School of Visual Arts, in New York. (He was born in Los Angeles.) Until recently, he tended to show up in such temples of the disaffected as the Times Square Show of 1981 (a contemporary *salon des refusés*) and Fun Gallery, an East Side storefront near Tompkins Square park. But success has hunted him down with a truly postmodern haste. He now lives on the Brazilian coast and sends his work north for big double shows such as the ones at Fun and at Tony Shafrazi Gallery, in SoHo.

Scharf is clearly the best painter in the urban-punk wing of the new American

Surrealism. His particular witches' brew is as close to indescribable as anyone's could get. There are whirling atoms, grinning spermatozoa, streaky swatches from a spray can, beasts out of Hanna-Barbera, sunset skies—a media hash of what one writer has called the "aggressive infantile" generation. The sources are comics, cartoons, consumerism, and cheap thrills. But there is also unusual intelligence here, and razzle-dazzle facility. Scharf, unlike most of his imitators, is not so naive about art history—some critics have noticed his close reading of the French Surrealist Yves Tanguy, and I see occasional asides to Cubism. More important is the spirit of subversion. Surrealism has been out of favor with certain prominent critics and curators for several decades. Their belief in the sublime nobility of the American experience may be hard to relinquish. But the technological apocalypse has invaded the unconscious existence of American kids. Since the real apocalypse may never happen, the threat takes on comic-book form. To those of us raised on television, the modern world is mostly a cartoon, anyway. The thought may be repulsive, but Scharf has described it perfectly. (Fun Gallery, 254 East 10th Street; Shafrazi, 163 Mercer Street; through March 24.)