

Lawson, Thomas. "The Apocalyptic Vision: Four New Imagists." *Artforum* (September 1983).



Nancy Chunn, *South America*, 1983, oil on canvas, 120 x 84", from *The Apocalyptic Vision...*

"The Apocalyptic Vision: Four New Imagists"

The observation that most of what passes for art criticism is little more than lists of worn clichés is itself a commonplace. But this familiarity does not make it any less true that art writers prefer to use resonant phrases which originally had little meaning and now, through overuse, have none. The popularity of such phrases rests in their utter inability to communicate any specific thing, idea, or emotion: thus they free the writer (and the patient reader) from any obligation to look at or think about the art in question. The upsurge of an expressionistically inclined imagism in painting—a cliché-ridden practice in its own right—provides an excellent ground on which the critic can practice his meaningless sport. One can easily imagine the thrill with which typewriters and word processors automatically list our favorite phrases—"personal urgency," "disquieting mood," "visionary character," or "deeply felt, violent figuration"; a tremendous crescendo of demonstrably nonsensical rhetoric that ultimately peaks with the most overworked Big Idea of all—the Apocalypse.

The vision of Sam Hunter, who curated this show, is predictably opaque. In his catalogue essay he invokes the nuclear threat, mentions millennial fears, and suggests that such things have something to do with neo-Expressionist painting. Of course he may well be right, but his truth is so large and all-encompassing as to be useless in helping any but the wooziest dingbat better understand these latest trends in art practice. And it (his truth) is far too large to explain (even to that woozy dingbat) his particular

selection of artists here. Two, Peter Dean and Michael Dvortcsak, are "expressive" painters, Dean frenetically so, Dvortcsak in a more studied, mythopoetic vein. Both painters are clearly drawn to the catastrophic, but to see Jack Ruby's assassination of Lee Harvey Oswald (the subject of one of Dean's paintings) as a vision of apocalypse is to reveal oneself hugely provincial or fatuously wrongheaded. I find neither of these painters of much interest and find their pictures in fact provincial and wrongheaded, and, yes, unoriginal. But my prejudices in this area are so well documented that I must excuse myself from writing more.

The other artists in the show, Nancy Chunn and Robert C. Morgan, are much more interesting, not least because their work sits so uncomfortably with the curatorial ideas expressed in the catalogue. Both favor a dry, almost cartoon-like presentation of forceful imagery and yet address us from a point somewhat askew of the obvious pictorial content. Morgan's choice of imagery seems deliberately accidental, given an apocalyptic significance only through the exercise of will. The paintings are extremely, elegantly intelligent maneuvers around the various issues of formalism. The largest piece here, *Sudden Exposure (Amchitka)*, consists of four panels in which a very pink standing figure delineates a black nonspace through a series of related gestures. The figure is male, and wears nothing but a swimsuit and sunglasses—a version of the swimmers that have appeared in Morgan's work for a decade. As the swimmer swings his arms the blackness surrounding him broadens or narrows; spatial orientation

is made uncertain. The painting is about balance and placement, in both formal and psychological terms, and seems adequate to the task without the rather heavy-handed addition of the nuclear reference in the title.

Of all the works in the show Chunn's have the least to do with the curatorial theme. Her paintings focus on certain kinds of emotive and cognitive dissonance, and only relate to that Big Idea in that nuclear war is an extreme case of such dissonance. She gives us weirdly deadpan images of violence—animals gnawing human bones, maps of countries hanging from meathooks—isolated and flattened against rich, dark grounds. These images verge on illustration, but are disturbing precisely because they fail to illustrate anything. Their point is not that a cheetah might chew a man, but that such an image ought to be frightful, and is rarely more than entertaining. In an age when images of massacre sell news magazines Chunn's paintings are horrifying, not because they portray horror, but because they remind us of our "normalized," passionless response to most horror. It is the almost antiseptic nature of Chunn's presentation, its unnerving comedy, that is chilling, and that is the significance of her work.

—THOMAS LAWSON