

***Cosmologies*, James Cohan Gallery**

***Mixed Signals*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts,**



Loberg, 2005. Kelly Heaton. mixed media on paper. Exhibited in *Mixed Signals*

Cosmologies January 11 – February 10, 2007

James Cohan Gallery, 533 West 26th Street, New York

Mixed Signals January 6 – February 3, 2007

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, New York

<http://www.feldmangallery.com>

The godfather of surrealism, André Breton, wrote in 1948 about *Art Brut*, art by the insane, as being an inspiration to the surrealists. That ". . . despite the individual suffering these (artworks) may entail, emerge here as guarantees of that total authenticity which is lacking in all other quarters and for which we thirst more and more each day."

Breton was prophetic. The surreal has become familiar and authenticity in contemporary culture is rarer than an act of generosity by a neo-con. At the same time, Art Brut and Outsider Art have become generally discredited terms for that never very well defined territory inhabited by mad, naive or merely obsessed artists. The imprecision of those terms has been further complicated

by the inflationary pressure brought about by those contemporary artists who have adopted the look or working methods of the so-called "outsiders".

There are currently two excellent exhibitions that embrace this blurring universe of art making and provide a compelling view of a catholic, accepting and thoroughly diverse spectrum of what might be exhibited as serious art in a commercial art gallery.

Cosmologies, a sprawling exhibition at James Cohan Gallery explores "the wide ranging strategies used to depict notions of the universal", juxtaposing all manner of works from the 10th century to the present which attempt to give shape and order to a world view. Diagrams, philosophy, pseudo-science, religion, enlightenment and humbuggery all vie for attention in this ambitious show.

In their collaborative curatorial statement, James Cohan, Elyse Goldberg, Arthur Solway, Jessica Lin Cox and Ginger Cofield declare that "*Cosmologies* aims to describe a lineage of thought which has passed through many cultures: an innate human desire to define a place in the universe. Whether it is through religious means, philosophical thought or personal expression, the instinct to create order from chaos is a commonality throughout time and history".

Further downtown, and delving further into that ". . . instinct to create order from chaos", the Ronald Feldman Gallery offers *Mixed Signals*, a group exhibition, curated by Ronald Feldman and Martina Batan, whose personal collection provided the majority of works in the exhibition.

While this *Mixed Signals* does not reach back as far in time as *Cosmologies*, it does include work that spans over 60 years. Its curatorial sub-topics include invented territories, personal obsessions and depictions of real world concerns, constructed in a variety of high art and found materials. Advertising and magazine images merge in collages to create beautiful, troubling and amusing visions. Obsessive gestures and delusional musings slip around, passing through one artist's hands to another, from one time and place to another, building a loose, convivial fraternity of restless makers. This band of accumulators, dreamers, recluses, sophisticates, hipsters and nutcases gather to create landscapes, documents, portraits, histories and entire worlds. The artists in both shows constantly returning to that "instinct to create order from chaos" - even if the chaos is only a unrelenting storm raging within that particular artist's skull.

I've purposely not mentioned the names of the artists in either of these shows. Part of the fun is the guessing at the names, the historical periods and the

mental states of the artists as they were making their art. That uncertainty of authorship, of artistic intent, the variety of methods and the span of historical time, combined with the energy represented in both these shows helps to shake one's confidence in the concept of art historical evolution, while quietly reaffirming the notion that art making is a fundamental and irresistible human enterprise.

Sean Elwood