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Best in Show

Recommendations by R.C. Baker

Joyce Pensato
Friedrich Petzel
535 West 22nd Street
Through February 2

The Eyes Have It

The trailer-trash of paints, enamel dries quickly into a shiny, turgid surface—not for nothing did de Kooning slather the stuff into his seminal 1948 “Black Paintings” (abstractions in which his genius for meaty brushstrokes entwining vulgarity with elegance began its long run). Joyce Pensato’s black-and-white enamel portraits of American cartoon idols—from Felix the Cat to Homer Simpson—stomp the de Kooning pedal through the Warholian floorboards and career into a jazzy head-on collision of content and form. *There’s a Riot Going On* (2007) features the furious brow of *South Park*’s Cartman, expressed through interlaced black and white drips that trail down into the wide white fields of his eyes. The organs of sight figure prominently in all these images, though they are less windows onto the soul than caverns dripping stalactites or, in the case of Homer, a cascade of white rivulets recalling the austere exuberance of Pat Steir’s “Waterfall” canvases. The scale of Pensato’s largest works (the face of *South Park*’s Stan is nine feet high) echoes some of the anxiety radiated by Warhol’s “Disasters,” while her stark palette amps up the sense of America in extremis—Mickey Mouse’s eyes are harsh black swipes, the dark background roiled as if with hurricane winds or slashing shrapnel. A keen technician, Pensato uses rags, solvents, and the clotted viscosity inherent to enamel itself to project visceral, conflicting emotion. We eagerly await her riffs on the expressive eyes and international gravitas of such anime stars as Speed Racer and Astro Boy.

Christopher Wilmarth

A sculptor who became world-famous by age 30, Wilmarth (1943–1987) had difficulty negotiating the art market, and for several years exhibited independently at his own Studio of the First Amendment, stating, “If it wasn’t magic, it was merchandise.” Still, the exigencies of selling his art proved daunting, and he eventually hooked up with a dealer—a few years before committing suicide. This conflicted artist used contrasting materials, often metal and glass, to embody a palpable tension between romantic vision and minimal expression. The six-foot-tall piece of frosted glass in *Long Memphis* (1973) bows out from the wall like a full sail. A steel cable plunges down its face, pokes through a hole in the glass to mistily traverse its three-foot width, and emerges again to shoot back up: geometry, texture, and engineering subsumed into an elegiac luminosity. The approximately nine-by-two-foot slab of steel in 1980’s *Gnomon’s Parade* (*Side*) travels down the wall before sharply angling out to meet a standing plank of glass; these elements collide like a stately waterfall. A support leg cut like a strip of pie dough from the steel is testament to Wilmarth’s lithe touch with rigid materials, becoming a drawing in air. *Betty Cunningham*, 541 W 25th, 212-242-2772. Through January 19.

‘On Line’
Picasso’s 1970 ink sketch *Deux Vieilles Femmes Contemplant L’Amour* depicts two withered hags, brambles of pen lines delineating their faces, gazing at a plump baby—coruscating draftsmanship married to expansive narrative. In two pen-and-ink versions of *At the Writing Table* (1921), George Grosz portrayed a balding bourgeois

struggling to commit a knotty idea to paper, the wine and ink bottles on the table echoing the candles flanking a coffin in the background; Grosz’s wry fatalism and witty polemics have oft been imitated (think Ralph Steadman) but never surpassed. Among the 40 artists in this drawing show is Chris Ware, represented by a page from his *Rusty Brown* strip, the blue-pencil roughs revealing the graceful foundations underlying the immaculate ink lines of his powerful, bleak tales. *Adam Baumgold*, 74 E 79th, 212-861-7338. Through January 26.

O. Winston Link

A photographer and lifelong train buff, Link (1914–2001) found his calling in 1955, when he began documenting the last steam-powered railroad in the U.S. Working closely with engineers and other employees of the Norfolk and Western line, Link set up elaborate flashbulb arrays to produce dramatic, even epic, black-and-white photographs: Children frolic in a stream at night as a locomotive thunders across the trestle over their heads; a train rumbles into a small town, the tracks so close to the buildings that Hopperesque scenes of existential domesticity can be seen through parted curtains. In one astonishing shot (a smoke-belching engine roars past a drive-in, where couples cuddle inside massive convertibles while a jet plane hurtles across

the screen), Link captures the simultaneous postwar decline and ascent of several American industries. *Danziger Projects*, 521 W 26th, 212-629-6778. Through January 12.

‘Plates by Artists’
It’s one thing to see Warhol turn his work into souvenir plates—there was plenty of schlock leavened into his

genius. But dinnerware by a master of the Soviet avant-garde such as El Lissitzky is a real revelation. Orange wedges and circles painted on black ceramic convey a sharp Suprematist charge—one can envision a table-pounding political debate over such place settings. John Chamberlain’s buffet plates, with edges as evenly machined as chain sprockets, sport smooth, polished surfaces far removed from his usual oeuvre of crushed automobile bodies. The 810 pieces on display include charming cartoon-monster bowls by Wilfredo Lam, plus Damien Hirst’s porcelain plate depicting an overflowing ashtray, a sly take on the usual practice of stubbing out fags in the dregs of your dessert. *Nohra Haime*, 41 E 57th, 212-888-3550. Through January 22.



Lance Letscher

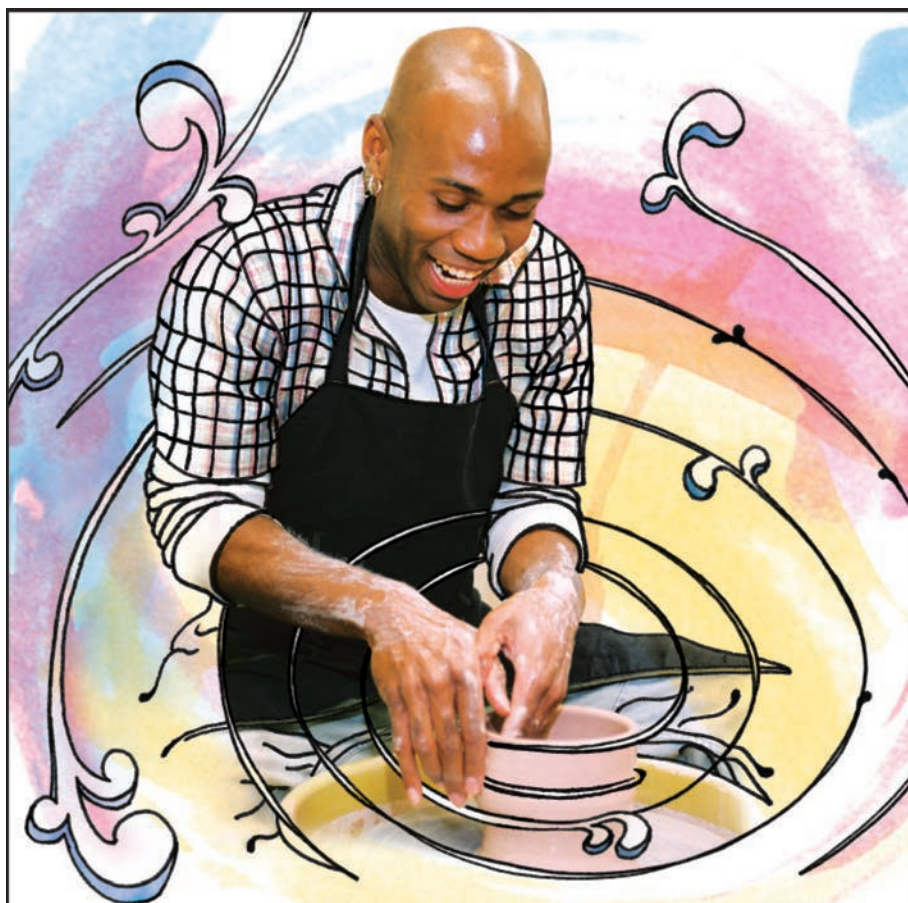
Enamel has a home in Pensato’s bag of tricks.

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