

The New Criterion

Art

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Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

On French Book Art/*Livres d'Artistes* at the New York Public Library; Clifford Odets at Michael Rosenfield Gallery; James Castle/Walker Evans at Knoedler & Company; Guy Pène du Bois at James Graham & Sons; Arthur Dove at Alexandre Gallery & Willem de Kooning at L&M Arts.

For everyone who has had his head scrambled by a season of theory and commercial madness, what a relief: the summer shows are here. Just when you think the art world has done you in and the storm troopers of Jacobin self-referentiality have got your number, *just then*, the offbeat shows of summer open, and it's all good until the fall. So long, allusions, subtexts, and power relations. Hello, freedom. With the art market softening and the orthodox ironists on break, there may be no better time than now to enjoy art just for the sake of it. Gosh, it can take some getting used to.

The art world's current preoccupation with itself can resemble a wilderness of mirrors. Consider a show like Richard Pettibone's "Sixty-four *Campbell's Soup Cans*," on view in May at Leo Castelli. Here were, you got it, sixty-four images of Warhol-style Campbell's Soup cans, which Pettibone had copied out of reproductions he found in *Artforum*. The Castelli press release read: "It is his subtle commentary on the works he chooses to re-present that makes his works not simply thought of as appropriation, but reinvention." Will the cycle of appropriation, er, *reinvention*, ever end?

Recently I ran across a former student of mine seeking advice on returning to a life in the arts. Run. Hide. Leave New York as fast as possible. So went my initial thoughts. But then, what ho, maybe there *are* places for the serious artist to make a stand. If it appeared hopeless, it wasn't. My student friend brought up the fact that he owned an old letter press, and that he had studied book binding as an undergraduate. *Tolle, lege*, I thought, problem solved.

The printed page can be a sanctuary from the circular aesthetics of contemporary art. To prove the point, there is an excellent new show on French book art organized by the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet and The New York Public Library. [\[1\]](#)

In its current incarnation, the show unfortunately loses something in translation. The wall texts speak of "a sense of urgency" that "activated the 'duologue'" between writer and artist. Ouch. Elsewhere we read how "Guy Debord and Asger Jorn magnificently trod another path, with striking vehemence and discord ... conveying a spirit of insurrection and risking adverse reaction." French to English by way of Mandarin Chinese.

But what the show lacks in wall labels it makes up for with the work on display. That's a statement I wish I could make more often. With 126 artists' books created between 1874 and 1999, the exhibition traces the development of book art from the first collaborations of Stéphane Mallarmé and Edouard Manet through the elaborate collages of Michel Butor and Bertrand Dorny.

The highlights come up front, with Mallarmé and Manet's *Le Corbeau*, a translation of *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe, from 1875, and *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, from 1876. As the exhibition puts it: "This combined perfection was achieved so quickly that it paralyzed the emulators." Inelegant but true. With woodcuts that envision Mallarmé as Poe, that raven fluttering about on the book's diaphanous paper, not to say silk bookmarks matching the colors of the ink: these examples set a high standard for the book as a total work of art.

The emulators were indeed paralyzed until around 1913, when Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay produced what must be the other highpoint of the exhibition. *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* did away with the folio format and merged poetry and abstract art onto a scrolling sheet. Describing a journey to Paris, one with an image of the Eiffel Tower eventually emerging from Delaunay's harmonic shapes, the work was intended to be folded up like a road map.

If only more artists had followed its direction. After the First World War, inventiveness more than invention took hold, with plenty of collage work by Max Ernst and assemblages by Marcel Duchamp, and later the *art brut* chicken scratch of Jean Dubuffet. Great artists like Miró and Giacometti collaborated on books too, but no matter how accomplished, their examples come off as second-rate expositions of mainstream talent. There are many good works here, but as a primary mode of artistic expression, book art has gone second-string—and possibly ripe for a comeback.

Vive la Révolution, comrades, and start manning the presses. The future of book art is wide open.

Now at Lincoln Center Theater, a new production of Clifford Odets's "Awake and Sing!" has received eight Tony nominations, including best revival of a play. But I'll take Odets's moonlighting as an insomniac draftsman with a love for Paul Klee any day over his social-realist stage work. On the centenary of Odets's birth, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery has brought together forty-three of Odets's colorful, amusing, and often lewd visions.^[2] Although a Broadway and Hollywood professional, Odets was a self-taught artist, something that might qualify him for "outsider" status, not that he should want for it. It's a far greater accomplishment for someone with intimate knowledge of mainstream art than for the isolated individual to produce idiosyncratic work. As a playwright and screenwriter, Odets was a Socialist who named names for HUAC alongside his friend Elia Kazan. As an artist working only for his own amusement, late at night, Odets was himself—a humorist with an eye for the strange and dreamlike. His work never rises to the level of Paul Klee. For the fun of it, all the better.

Regrettably, "James Castle/Walker Evans: Word-Play, Signs and Symbols," a supercilious show now at Knoedler, also ranks high on the laugh-o-meter—indirectly so.^[3] James Castle was a self-taught deaf-mute artist, born in 1900 and raised on the family ranch in Idaho where he spent most of his life. He died in Boise in 1977. Castle composed his drawings on found paper with a combination of soot and spit. Whether he could read or understand the significance of the letters and labels he reproduced is debatable. He was, pretty obviously, an outsider artist. But at Knoedler every effort has been made to align his work within the main currents of modern art, here with a paired exhibition of late-career polaroid snapshots of signs by Walker Evans, one of the last century's more insider artists. Such pairings do a disservice both to Evans, who found a new vision, and to Castle, for whom little is known beyond fanciful speculation. Castle's current popularity no doubt has to do with an academic rage for semiotics and the fact that contemporary art has come to resemble Castle's own work. Castle's canned pumpkin labels and block letters predate similar examples by Warhol, Pettibone, and Johns. But as with other outsider artists, Castle has been employed to give mainstream sensibility a primitive, essential significance. The rage to rhapsodize over such outsiders resembles the fetishizing of African art a century ago. A century from now, it will appear just as ridiculous. Consider Stephen Westfall's catalogue entry, where we read how "Castle shows his striking instinct for abstraction and, perhaps, an inclination for the psychically reinforcing energies of the mandala." Perhaps is right.

Two years ago I wrote about part one of a two part, museum-quality show of paintings by Guy Pène du Bois at James Graham. Right on schedule, part two has arrived, starting with Pène du Bois's signature work from the late 1920s. [4] *Mother and Daughter* (1928) and *Father and Son* (1929), both on loan from the Whitney Museum, best exemplify Pène du Bois's great talent for rendering scenes of high-society figures as plastic volumes—painted, hollowed-out vessels of human beings. Following a crisis of style, not to say finances, after the crash of 1929, he warmed up the cold austerity of his genre scenes, softening his palette and brushwork, and in so doing lost his strange, vital edge. A return to form in the 1940s, however, with portraits like *Jane* (1948), produced some of the best, most confident work of his career. Pène du Bois was an outsider in the center of modern art. To paraphrase what I wrote two years ago: modernism be damned—this *is* great work.

Finally there is the happy coincidence of two shows featuring work by Arthur Dove and Willem de Kooning. [5] For anyone with an aversion to the high styles of either artist (as I have to the stiff chromatic gradations of Dove and the Freudian excesses of de Kooning), these shows at Alexandre and L&M come as welcome relief. Both, too, feature artists in late careers discovering new-found freedoms. Many of the small, notecard-sized watercolor studies that Dove made on his return to Long Island in the 1930s, like the rooftop-features of *The Brothers*, became distilled abstractions. But the studies at Alexandre maintain an ad hoc inventiveness absent from later work. In the 1970s, de Kooning, well established on Long Island, began exploring the abstract sensibilities he first developed in the 1940s. Here, he adopted the colorful palette of his surroundings and processed it through the rippling vision of light reflected off water, similar to what he had done in his amorphous sculptures of the same period. The results are spectacular in both cases. They speak to the unrecognized wisdom of my departed mentor Kermit Champa, who maintained that advanced music brought about the birth of modern painting. Both de Kooning and Dove, who became premier abstractionists in their respective generations, were influenced by sound and recorded music. De Kooning purchased a hi-fi early in his career that cost his savings. Dove noted that “I should like to take wind and water and sand as a motif and work with them, but it has to be simplified in most cases to color and force lines and substances, just as music has done with sound.” The silence surrounding these abstractions amplifies their lapping, aural effects. De Kooning titled one work from 1975: “Screams of Children Come from Seagulls.” Now there's the anthem of an endless summer—and in music, modern life, and the printed page, the call of aesthetic salvation.

Notes

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1. “French Book Art/Livres d’Artistes” opened at the New York Public Library on May 5 and remains on view through August 19, 2006. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. “It’s Your Birthday, Clifford Odets!” opened at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, on May 19 and remains on view through August 4, 2006. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. “James Castle/Walker Evans: Word-Play, Signs and Symbols” opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on May 4 and remains on view through August 11, 2006. [Go back to the text.](#)
4. “Guy Pène du Bois: Painter of Modern Life. Part II: The Later Years” opened at James Graham & Sons, New York, on May 11 and remains on view through June 30, 2006. [Go back to the text.](#)
5. “Arthur Dove: Watercolors” opened at Alexandre Gallery, New York, on May 13 and remains on view through June 16, 2006. “Willem de Kooning: Paintings 1975–1978” opened at L&M Arts, New York, on April 20 and remains on view through June 3, 2006. [Go back to the text.](#)

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