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Art

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Armchair adventures

by [James Panero](#)

On Joe Zucker at Paul Kasmin and Nolan/Eckman; Philip Pearlstein at Robert Miller & Antoine-Louis Barye at James Graham.

What if Homer had decided to be post-Homeric: stories about heroes? Been there. Linear B? Done that. The new thing: Homer sings his poems into an amphora—instead of writing them down—and deposits the vase in the Hellespont. He then composes a “text” about his conceptual, subversive act.

In 1970, the earth artist Robert Smithson—no Homer, granted—promoted a similar stunt. He gave orders in Utah for the boys to get to work on his *Spiral Jetty*. Two dump trucks, a tractor, and a front-end loader belched diesel fumes into the air as the cameras rolled. Plans were consulted, maps drawn up, “texts” written, laborers labored. Six-thousand-plus rock-tons later, coiling out 1500 feet in the Great Salt Lake, *Jetty* emerged from the soft salt bed. Yet in the spirit of Jean Tinguely’s *Homage to New York* from a decade before, Smithson prayed for the destruction of his own work of art. And nature obliged. Smithson’s conceptual affront to the gallery system, funded by the Virginia Dwan Gallery of New York, was inundated soon after completion, rather unexpectedly, by the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake. Underwater, in the middle-of-nowhere, Utah, *Spiral Jetty* became a great and lasting sensation. Smithson had triumphed. Formalism was out. Entropy was in. So much so that when *Spiral Jetty* began re-emerging during a dry spell in the late 1990s, one artist saw fit to generate his own entropy: he rolled a part of *Jetty* back into the lake. (Now the Dia Foundation—which took control of *Jetty* in 1999—wonders if the work of art can be saved from the rising tides. Oh my dear Dia.)

What does it mean when Robert Smithson sinks a swirl of stone in Utah? Or when the minimalist artist Tony Smith announces that a drive on the New Jersey Turnpike spells for him the end of art? Or when MOMA’s alternative art space PS 1 mounts an installation piece in the back of its boiler room, or in its attic, or its stairwell, or its basement washroom? You really cannot take it with you. Dia may be able to fit a tilted arc in its factory space at Beacon. Do not expect the same luxury in your walk-up apartment. More than an attack on the gallery system, late modern art has mounted a serious challenge to private, domestic collection, and in turn to the notion of art as the home-bound narrator of more exotic tales. With earth art like *Spiral Jetty*—as with minimalist art, conceptual art, and installation art—we get something like the romantic mode in reverse: the domestication of the exotic.

Is it a trend? Perhaps. The last thirty years may have been a long, slow dirge for private art—but with codas and major-key refrains, the art world has witnessed many happy exceptions to its own rule.

Joe Zucker started out in the late 1960s as a Chicago-based artist by drawing whimsical and fantastic

images of pirate ships and far-off locales. Since then, and after moving to Long Island, he has continued striving, seeking, and finding with unexpected results. In New York this month, Zucker is enjoying two simultaneous exhibitions: a show of drawings ranging from 1977 to 2003 at Nolan/Eckman Gallery in Soho, and a tightly arranged exhibition called “Joe Zucker Unhinged,” of ships and houses and scenes created in a similar system, at Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea.[\[1\]](#)

The innocent whimsy one finds in Zucker’s drawings is instantly likable. His handwritten narratives and descriptions, found inked at the bottom of many of the pieces at Nolan/Eckman, deserve quotation:

Admiral Don Alfonso, Luis, Kent, Vagas, Billy Joe, Don Alvarez, Rodrigues, self-appointed majesty and governor of all Boro Bula and his parrot Bombo waiting for his flagship: the George Moore. (*Admiral Don Alfonso* [1976]) The ghostly spectre of the slaver Trinidad rises among the wrecks and reefs of Madagascar on a moonlit night during July of 1834. Notice the Saint Elmo’s fire in the spans and mastheads. (*Slaver Trinidad* [1978]) Not aware that the bristles used in his favorite filbert brushes came from the tail of the very beast he sits astride, Douanier Rousseau watches his faithful studio assistant Hassau set up his easel near the Giza pyramid complex outside of Cairo Egypt (*Not Aware that the Bristles* [1996])

Zucker’s interest in such fictional exactitude extends to his diagrammatic images like *Axe Lake (Legend)* (1994), where he has created a grid of a lake surrounded by a comprehensive key that includes everything from fish to fowl, logging buildings to mills, “vodka martinis” to “gibsons.”

While Zucker lets his pictorial and interpretive imagination run loose in his drawings, his paintings now at Paul Kasmin are nothing if not chaste. In reproduction, I would even call them uninteresting. Zucker begins with large canvas squares of equal size. He divides each square into simple geometric shapes with inch-high wood ribbings, sometimes mapping out images of sailboats in shorthand. Other times more abstract patterns emerge, such as with *Interior #2* (2002). Held flat or at slight angles, Zucker then pours acrylic paints of various colors into each triangle, rectangle, and odd polygon. What keeps all this from the prosaic is the viscous, rippled, bubbled, and sometime cracked surface treatment that results. Above or beside each square, Zucker has positioned another square of equal size, produced in the same way but of solid color—an abstract colorfield forming a sky and foil to its more pictorial counterpart. *Catch, Yawl, Schooner, Sloop*: Zucker knows his boats as well as he knows form. The diagrammatic impulse from the drawings carries through, but here the wild fancy has been replaced by a quiet poetry.

We always knew Philip Pearlstein was good, and with his latest exhibition of work at Robert Miller in Chelsea—his fourth at the gallery, in fact—he’s up to much of the same thing he’s been doing for the past twenty years.[\[2\]](#) But is it possible that Pearlstein is getting better at it? Yes, it is possible. Here are the famous fleshy nudes, the odd angles, the commercial detritus and exotic bric-à-brac. The lion and snake sculpture? Yes. The rugs? Check. The mummy balloon and clear inflatable pool chair? Double check. What gets amplified in this show is the tension within many of the works, both formal and compositional, and the clarity of the visual language. The pairings of objects and nudes come off as more invasive—the objects more invidious—the nudes more at risk. *Model with Duck Kiddie Car on Bedouin Rug* (2003) is one example. Here the model does not merely languish over the canvas; by showing us the kiddie car wheels and by cropping the head of his nude (not really a “subject”—the nudes rarely are), Pearlstein hints at the potential for a serious trip and fall: nudes and duck kiddie cars should not mix. Other examples are *Two Models with Old Whirly-Gig: When the Wind Blows the Figures Work* (2003) and the similar image in watercolor, *Male and Female Models with Whirly-Gig #1* (2002). Here an antique New England weathervane of miniature

woodmen chopping and sawing logs (the figures work, as the title suggests) is positioned a little too close for comfort to the nude male model's—well, you know where this is going. In his execution, Pearlstein reveals a dry wit as well as a penchant for the squirmy. Other ominous objects may be found in *Model with Butcher's Sign* (2003) and *Model with Old Iron Butcher Sign #2* (2003), where the green iron monstrosity of the butcher sign might as well be a Victorian IUD. Elsewhere, toy jumbo jets dive and Mickey Mouses stare out across the nude tableaux like unwelcome babes from toyland. Philip Pearlstein has been meditating on the domestic scene for years—the clutter only gets worse.

If only artists still thought small. The most tempting show this month may be “Antoine-Louis Barye and the American Collector” at James Graham.^[3] Could there be anything more outré than a French artist (born 1795) who trained under François-Joseph Bosio and Antoine-Jean Gros only to become an *animalier* sculptor, and with desktop-size work to boot? In different hands, the results might have been disastrous. Yet very few of the over one-hundred pieces at James Graham disappoint. Barye was once called the “Michelangelo of the menagerie,” and the appellation suits. Barye could take an intimate knowledge of animal anatomy and pit such beasts against each other in ways that might put the *Death of Laocoön* to shame: his animals scratch, gnash, spring, and claw at one another; they twist around their prey. Elephants crush tigers; lions attack horses; bears wrestle each other; kites pick off hares; snakes hiss at lions (some of the models have an uncanny resemblance to the animal models in Pearlstein's paintings). One of the notable features of the current catalogue is the index checklist, which divides the animals on display into the following categories: “Figurative,” “Equine,” “Cervine,” “Feline,” “Bovine,” “Ursine,” “Avian,” “Reptilian,” “Elephantine,” “Canine,” “Leporine,” and “Primates.” I may have missed one or two, but you get the idea.

The show, curated by Cameron M. Shay, has been partially titled “the American Collector.” William T. Walters, a Baltimore businessman, took an interest in Barye a year before the sculptor's death in 1875. Walters commissioned a cast of over one hundred bronzes in Barye's collection, creating a sizable American presence for the French sculptor. Several of the works in the show are on loan from private collections; James Graham & Sons has also identified the foundry and cold stamps for each piece.

The delight with Barye is in the details: a curling tail, a twisting neck, a cracked hoof. One Barye collector, quoting his father in the show's catalogue, remarked: “they'll look good in your law office someday.” Alas, this is the sort of statement that might get you fired from *Artforum* magazine.

When *Spiral Jetty* sank into the Great Salt Lake, one wonders if its advocates realized what had been lost in the inundation. Here's a hint: it wasn't a pile of rocks. “Antoine-Louis Barye and the American Collector” opened at James Graham & Sons, New York, on January 17 and remains on view through February 28, 2004. A catalogue of the show, edited by Cameron M. Shay, Carrie V. Hart, and Katie Clifford, has been published by the gallery.

Notes

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1. “Joe Zucker: Unhinged” at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, and the concurrent show “Joe Zucker: Drawings 1977–2003” at Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York, opened on January 8 and remain on view through February 7, 2004. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. “Philip Pearlstein” opened at Robert Miller Gallery, New York, on January 8 and remains on view through February 7, 2004. [Go back to the text.](#)

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