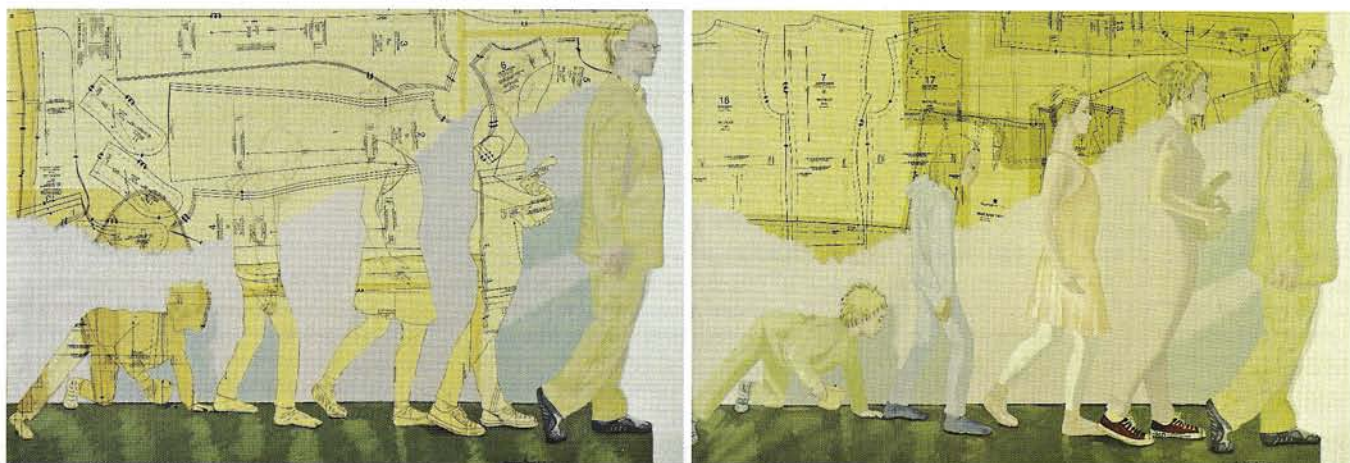


# Deciphering the Enigmatic Iconography of Marie-Hélène Beaudry



from the "Re-Claiming" series

In her profusely illustrated book "Seeing Through Clothes," first published by Viking Press in 1975, Anne Hollander an art historian with a special interest in costume and design explores, in her own words, "how clothes in works of art have been connected with clothes in real life, during the two and a half thousand years of Western history in which the aim of art has been to represent the visible world with conviction."

One suspects that if Hollander were at work on that book today, she might wish to reproduce and expound upon the unique role that clothing plays in the paintings of the celebrated Quebec-born artist Marie-Hélène Beaudry, whose exhibition "Re-Claiming," was seen recently at Caelum Gallery, 508-526 West 26th Street, in Chelsea. For not only does Beaudry make specific types of fashions important semiotic signifiers in relation to the figures in her paintings, she also employs actual tailoring patterns, particularly the type put out by McCall's and other such companies for home sewing, as a prominent part of her compositions. Even more germane in Beaudry's case, however, is how she expands beyond what Hollander refers to as "the visible world" to evoke an inner zone, an imaginative space, as well.

Ostensibly, Beaudry's new series, prompted to some degree by the stirrings of renewed hope and optimism in the Obama era, is a plea for ecological and moral awareness in which five figures, seen in a single-file procession based loosely on Darwin's diagrammatic illustrations of evolution, represent various stages of human development from infancy to adulthood. Each figure represents a distinctly different type clad in a very specific sort of outfit; each grows slightly larger in ascending scale. Reading the image from left to right, as one would a written text, we see a small child in light green pajamas and patterned socks crawling on all fours; a preadolescent girl in powder-blue hoody, exercise pants, and darker blue socks, slumping along in the indolent manner of her age group; a slightly

more self-conscious teenage girl in a salmon pink shift and ballet slippers of the same hue, her shoulders thrown back as if balancing an invisible book on her head to improve her posture; a young woman of perhaps college age in a pale lavender t-shirt and tights worn with red low-top sneakers, carrying a camera; and a young man in a khaki suit and patterned sportshirt with blue running shoes whose confident stride hints that he has elected himself leader of the group. (In fact, his profile is actually cut out of the edge of the painting, since he represents the ultimate evolution from the formulation of an idea to the taking of an action. And when his head turns slightly toward the viewer in the final painting of the sequence, according to the artist, it is a call to join him and relinquish the role of passive observer.

While the clothing of the figures is more or less gender-specific, they all have a somewhat androgynous quality that makes a definite and yet finally elusive statement about contemporary life and mores. For example, the crawling child, the college-age woman, and the young man in the suit all have similarly shaggy short (for a female) or longish (for a male) hairstyles.

Besides the most obvious comparison to the evolutionary scale, the positions (to this viewer, at least) evoke memories of other processions, most particularly the cover of The Beatles' "Abbey Road" album, showing George, Paul, Ringo, and John crossing the street near the London recording studio where the album was conceived.

Although hardly as irrational as the wild speculation that the album cover prompted among Beatle fans worldwide about the possible death of Paul McCartney (since he was out of step with his bandmates and barefoot!), Beaudry's iconography prompts one to speculate about the meaning of the subtle changes that occur on viewing the six paintings in the series in relation to one another.

For while in each, the outlines of the figures are identical, some are variously

negated when the diagrammatic shapes within the cloud-like mass of the tailoring pattern hovering at the top of the composition spill down to fill their silhouettes. Most often, only one figure retains color and solid form, while the others flit with negative space, becoming mere receptacles for the skeletal outlines of garment parts identified by numbers and descriptive phrases such as "jacket back," "top front," and so on.

In a conversation with this writer, Beaudry stated that she uses such sewing patterns to signify the habitual patterns of thinking and behavior into which we have a tendency to fall and often become "stuck." However, it is interesting to note how some of the shapes within them take on their own figurative allusiveness, creating an almost hallucinatory sense of the superimposition of one reality upon another. One of the most striking examples is in a painting where the only figure retaining color and substance is that of the young man in the suit leading the procession. However, he is upstaged; for here, too, the head of the young woman holding the camera and walking immediately behind him is lent a decidedly canine aspect by the pattern shape, labeled "back facing," that usurps it and resembles a stylized dog's head. Suddenly she is transformed into one of those similarly two-dimensional hybrid human/animal figures familiar from ancient Egyptian tomb painting, and one recalls that for the Egyptians such figures represented gods. (This connection, arrived at independently, seemed even more significant when one learned some time after viewing the painting that the artist actually conceived this figure as the one representing "spirituality and an opening of the self.")

However, this metamorphosis does not appear contrived; it seems to occur as the natural consequence of a serendipitous connection to an ancient artistic tradition of which even the artist herself may not have been aware at the moment of creation.

*Continued on page 30*

GALLERY&STUDIO 25



## ONISHI GALLERY

*Continued from page 4*

Add the enigmatic imagery of Bruno Petronzi, which suggests a merger of Faberge eggs and insect X-rays; Clara Scarpella's mysterious black and white photo-abstraction, suggesting a free-form origami creature in a corrugated landscape; and a catalog cover by Stefania Carrozzini that suggests a retro-Lady Gaga hallucinating psychedelic butterflies, and this highly engaging group show does indeed fulfill the curator's vision of art that "produces energetic sparks able to shake up our common sense and reality."

— Ed McCormack

## CHARLES MINGUS III

*Continued from page 9*

"My anthropomorphic blue-eyed macaroni juxtapositions are an agitprop response to Western iconic and mythical ploys and propaganda tricks. Like the blue-eyed Barbie, these high-fashion psychological operations are the product of Madison Avenue scientific hucksterism with military-spec religiosity and Wall Street flimflam. This agglomeration masquerades as 'civilization,' yet enforces divergent personal identities and cultural schizophrenia."

Even a backward Luddite like myself, admittedly partial to the tactile pleasures of his paintings and found object assemblages, can't help but realize that in digital prints, Charles Mingus III has finally found a medium that moves fast enough for his image saturated mind, realizing literally at the speed of light the elaborate conceptual conceits inherent in such titles as "Magritte: Colonialist Prognosticator of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypses," and "Thompson-Koons-Rosenquist" — the latter a work of especially erudite visual art criticism juxtaposing the underground legacy of the woefully underrated late African-

American artist Bob Thompson with that of two grossly overrated white art stars of different eras.

I once heard Pete Hamill go on about how the advent of the computer is a godsend for novelists. That goes double for the unique visionary sociopolitical surrealist Charles Mingus III. — Ed McCormack

## NEW AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALANDER ART

*Continued from page 15*

creatures cavorting by the water. Jaunita McCleary employs the camera like a brush to create floral still life compositions that, with their subdued tones and formal austerity, echo the Old Masters in the postmodern mode of "painterly photography."

Like that of her co-exhibitors in this engaging survey, her work demonstrates the forward-looking diversity of Australian and New Zealand art today.

—Maurice Taplinger

## MARIE-HÉLÈNE BEAUDRY

*Continued from page 25*

Call it a kind of divine intervention that can occur when an artist is intuitively attuned to cross-cultural currents that run deeper than conscious reasoning.

The enigmatic narrative allusiveness that makes Marie-Hélène Beaudry's paintings so engaging is enhanced by exquisite skills as a colorist, coupled with a unique painterly refinement. Although her medium is oils on canvas, she handles it more like fresco, employing a subtle range of pearlescent hues to lend her pictures an almost ethereal beauty. This plays off intriguingly against the colloquial details in her work, as if to make the point that even such seeming trifles as a particular style of exercise suit or running shoe are given a numinous dimension by simple virtue of being a part of a mysterious whole. Thus while

the title of "Re-Claiming" may have other meanings as well — particularly in relation to the recovery of self and its assertion through the social armor of clothing — to this writer it would appear that what is being reclaimed here is a sense of everyday magic.

— Ed McCormack

## SALMAGUNDI

*Continued from page 26*

buildings. And another meticulous technique is dazzlingly employed in "Watergater," by High Winds Medal Award winner Kathleen Maling, wherein what at first glance appears to be a splashy wave of water suddenly morphs before one's eyes into the much more daunting head of a surfacing alligator.

Most people who tend to think of watercolor as a more or less conservative medium have probably never seen the illuminated manuscript pages of William Blake — or for that matter the work of a contemporary visionary of the medium such as Wilmer Anderson, who won the Hardie Gramatky Memorial Award for "Ringling Brother's Dream," in which acrobats perform on the back of an elephant and local

folk crowd around in a stylized landscape of rolling hills to watch other circus performers swing from trapezes suspended from layered strata of clouds. Nor are such people likely to be aware of an artist such as Paul B. Remney, AWS, Memorial Award winner Preecha Promprabruk whose "Speaker # 3" is a feat of trompe l'oeil, creating the illusion of a collage made with corrugated cardboard, computer parts with shadow-casting wires, a discarded stereo speaker, and torn fragments of text — all convincingly simulated in aquarelle.

All of the artists mentioned here, along with numerous others in this comprehensive survey, share the honor of membership in the most prestigious exhibition society known to their medium, along with past members such as Childe Hassam, Dong Kingman, Andrew Wyeth and many other luminaries. The winners, to whom over \$ 40 000 in prize money was distributed, have the double honor of having been singled out for their individual contributions to the distinguished history of this venerable medium.

— J. Sanders Eaton

## Leonard Briggs



"Flowers 2"

## Flowers, Landscapes, Portraits

For information: [s.l.briggs@verizon.net](mailto:s.l.briggs@verizon.net)

## Gelabert Studios Gallery

offers artists the opportunity to showcase their work in a unique, elegant Upper West Side setting. Fully equipped gallery for rent on weekly or yearly basis. Top quality lighting. Call 212-874-7188 for rental details or visit our website: [www.gelabertstudiosgallery.com](http://www.gelabertstudiosgallery.com). Gelabert Studios Gallery, 255 W. 86th St. (at Broadway), New York City 10024.

