

# The New York Times

## Fanciful to Figurative to Wryly Inscrutable

By HOLLAND COTTER

July 8, 2005

“SNAP out of it” is the word to the New York art industry after a couple seasons of fanciful, salable, boring painting and drawing. And judging by this summer’s crop of gallery group shows, the art world is listening, at least enough to add a dose of conceptual fiber to a high-carb bijoux diet.

Not that the situation has swung in any decisive direction. It’s just become more complicated, which is good. Robert Smithson is giving Jack Smith a run for his money as presiding deity. Rock ‘n’ roll still holds the airwaves, but buzzed with a static of satellite news.

And in the face of the hard-sell campaign for a return to traditional values - Sincerity, Beauty, the Object - that has been the art establishment’s sole contribution to 21st-century culture so far, some people are asking again: why can’t irony be sincere? Why can’t ideas be beautiful? Why pile glut onto glut? A few Chelsea galleries are even beginning to consider giving space to artists’ ephemeral projects, which will pay off in credibility if not in cash, and may actually make art feel like an adventure rather than an uptight insider game.

Anyway, from a long list of group shows, I’ve picked a handful that give some sense of where the balance stands. Most are in Chelsea, though there’s plenty of activity elsewhere. Young artists are to the fore - with so many art schools charging so much money to create careers, how could they not be? - though history gets a nod. Even when the temperature is high in July, the galleries tend to be cool, the personnel laid-back, the shows adventurous, all reasons why midsummer is my favorite art season.

### ‘Atomica’

When the Brooklyn Institute does finally open, it is bound to present a fair amount of topical art. For many artists in Africa, Asia and Latin America, being politically alert is simply part of being a world citizen. And some of this summer’s group shows project a similar consciousness. It comes across obliquely - as existential disturbance, you might say - at Gladstone and Petzel, and concretely in “Atomica: Making the Invisible Visible,” a two-part exhibition split between adjoining galleries, Esso and Lombard-Freid Fine Arts.

Conceived by Ombretta Agrò Andruff, Esso’s director, the show coincides with the 60th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan on Aug. 6, 1945, though it also has obvious pertinence to the war in Iraq. The infamous image of a mushroom-shape cloud recurs through the galleries like the toll of a bell; yet the show as a whole is notable for its modulated handling of its loaded theme.

The juxtaposition of Davide Cantoni’s whisper-soft burned-paper drawings with Nobuho Nagasawa’s neo-Pop “Nuclear Cuisine” defines a broad, sophisticated formal ground. And pieces like Lisi Raskin’s fantastic candy-colored painting of a missile control room and Marc Handelman’s “Flag Dispersion,” an explosive abstract painting in red, white, blue and gold, carry it away from didacticism to some other place. HOLLAND COTTER