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| <p>100 In View
Felix Gonzalez-Torres
and Roni Horn
JOSHUA MACK</p> <p>101 Jane and Louise Wilson/Michael
McCarthy: The Knot Garden
MORGAN FALCONER</p> <p>102 New York
Jack Goldstein: Films
Records Paintings
Jack Goldstein: Paintings
JONATHAN T.D. NEIL</p> <p>103 Pat Steir
JOHN EWING

Wayne Thiebaud
JONATHAN T.D. NEIL</p> | <p>104 Lucas Samaras
JOSHUA MACK
Tim Gardner
JOHN EWING</p> <p>105 Los Angeles
Stan Kaplan
SHANA NYS DAMBROT
Dean Sameshima
TERRY R. MYERS</p> <p>106 London
Susan Hiller
ANDREAS LEVENTIS
Vincent Fecteau
J.J. CHARLESWORTH</p> <p>107 Gregory Crewdson
SALLY O'REILLY

Constructed Worlds
CHARLES HOLLAND</p> | <p>108 Waste Material
ROSALIND FURNESS

Dublin
Clarke & McDevitt Present
LUKE CLANCY</p> <p>109 Düsseldorf
Darren Almond
AMANDA COULSON</p> <p>110 Paris
Loris Gréaud
PAOLA NOÉ</p> <p>111 Berlin
Steven Pippin
ALENA WILLIAMS</p> |
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Pat Steir: Moons and a River

Cheim & Read

31 MARCH – 7 MAY

Pat Steir's vocabulary of splashes, splatters and rivulets has always generated a paradoxical response. Up close, her handling of paint appears haphazard, rash and uncontrolled. But at a remove, those same loose, aqueous marks resolve into precisely depicted and coherent images. With these six oil-on-canvas paintings – five large and one mural-size – Steir introduces quasi-mystical motives and nature references into abstract works that nonetheless preserve her signature, watery world.

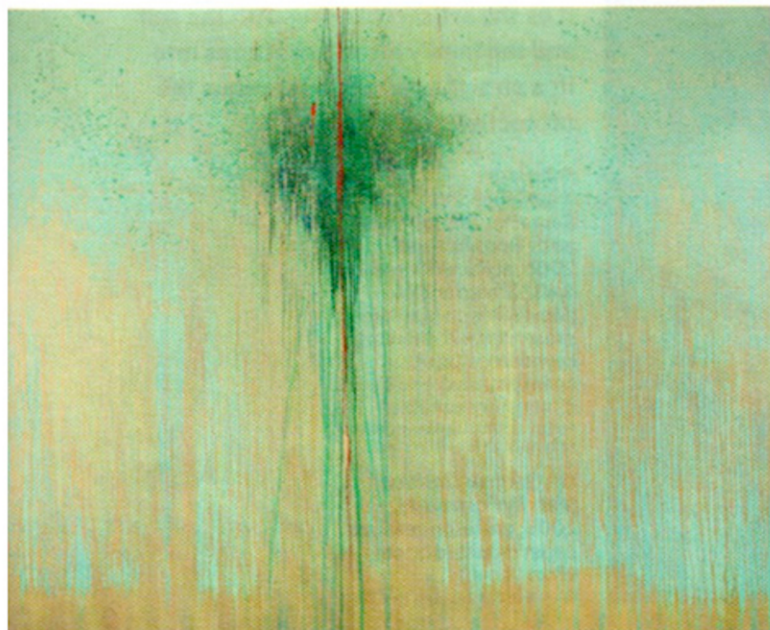
At first pass, the eleven-by-thirty-seven-foot *Blue River* (all works 2005) is a massive painting that brightly dominates the show's darker moods. Columnar washes of blue and white (slightly tapered into gentle curves at the top of the canvas) compose the picture's central, Niagara Falls-like expanse. This vast area is flanked and foregrounded by opposing swathes of thicker paint – hot red on the left-hand edge and icy silver on the right.

Like visual onomatopoeia, Steir's painterly gestures feel at one with what they depict. We've come to take this effect for granted, but it's extraordinary how Steir translates a physical flinging of paint into a representation of splashing water. That shift from physical action to illusionistic space is so direct and uncomplicated that it feels magical, even a little spooky. As usual, Steir's new work makes this transforming leap appear instant and effortless.

The other five paintings have a hushed quality that fairly drips with gravitas. The liquid effects in the *Moon* pictures variously suggest dripping wax, flowing or spattered blood, and, as the titles of the works promise, even the pour of moonlight. In *Summer Moon*, a mottled, dark green form hovers in the upper centre of the canvas. It is further obscured by a shimmering, streaky veil of gold and pale green paint. The form and the entire image are gashed, top to bottom, with a bright, bisecting streak of red paint.

Black Moon and *Sun Moon* feature the same general forms hovering in the same upper-centre location – simple, incomplete circles suggested by arcs of heavily daubed paint with trailing drips. The first canvas, black on black, has a green undercoat that emerges almost imperceptibly in thin, slicing marks. The second canvas, white on white, sports a red- and a yellow-painted support edge on either side, which bounce faintly glowing colour onto the gallery wall.

Ghost Moon and *Moon Beam* are curiously sublime works. In the first, the moon form is a gloppy lobe of white paint, bathed in a dense, striated shower of the palest greens, greys and blues. The second picture repeats the earlier top-to-bottom bisecting gash, but this time it's a thick spike of gold on a sparkling silver field. Around it gathers a gossamer shroud-like effect that is actually mostly blank canvas and faint traces of pale green paint scraped from the surface. As we've come to expect from Steir, the pictorial and the physical are inextricable. **JE**



Left
Pat Steir *Summer Moon*,
2005, oil on canvas,
278 x 348 cm
COURTESY CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK

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Tim Gardner

303 Gallery

15 APRIL - 28 MAY

In his rapidly ascendant career, Tim Gardner has been identified as a chronicler of 'spring-break male-bonding rituals' – photorealist depictions of college-age boys cavorting, or recovering from cavorting, in beachfront settings. These delicately rendered watercolours have been based on actual snapshots given to the artist by his brothers, their friends and other acquaintances.

In his latest works – all of which are rendered in pastel on gessoed paper, then mounted on canvas – Gardner offers a sober prequel to the unconscious high jinks of the earlier watercolours. Working from Olan Mills-style family portraits and high-school yearbook photographs, Gardner narrows his focus like a rifle sight on his own unsuspecting family. The milieu of the gallery provides the perfect foil for these earnest subjects: their awkward awareness of self-presentation is thrown into even greater relief by having been shifted into the hypercritical, artworld environment; the contrast in contexts accentuating their different value systems.

In *Untitled (Family Portrait 1)* (2005), male bonding is replaced by family bonding: one can sense the conscious energy that holds this collective effort together. Many of us can identify with the phenomenon (and, ultimately, that's a good

thing), but encountering it unalloyed and head-on generates a complex response: equal parts nostalgia, nausea, humour and horror. The family 'project', so unrelenting in the early stages and utterly lacking in objective distance, is portrayed note-perfect in the subjects' unguarded grins. As depicted, the three healthy boys and their parents, with heads inclined slightly toward each other, present a portrait of love: other issues are played down or latent.

In *Untitled (Family Portrait 2)* (2005), which depicts the same family some years later, objective distance is firmly ensconced and these 'other issues' are now foregrounded. The oldest son looks at the viewer with a critical smirk. Mother is in her own space, on the way to self-actualization. Father has foregone his suit, which spoke of striving ambition, for a casual polo shirt. The youngest boy appears to have traded cuteness for more substantial mischief. And the artist has begun to give the camera his profile: a deflecting, protective posture.

The wonder here is seeing how Gardner aligns the detached scrutiny needed to view one's own family with a scrupulous eye for visual detail. These are virtuosic works, impressive for penetrating the subjects' veil of banality with gorgeous workmanship – the gold of a graduation gown, the mother's flower-print dress, the blue-tinged mischief in the youngest son's face.

Lastly, as a kind of coda, there's the black-and-white portrait of the artist's father, based on a 1950s photograph of the confident young man. The resemblance to the artist is striking, and one cannot help but read it as the artist reckoning with the self and the family history that goes into it: a straight-on appraisal minus the protective profile. JE



Tim Gardner *Untitled (Family Portrait 1)*, 2005, pastel on gessoed paper mounted on canvas, 97 x 114 cm

COURTESY 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK