

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Gallery installers configure the exhibition of art by Dale Henry, who requested his art be used for noncommercial purposes, at the Clocktower Gallery, which is leaving its space in TriBeCa.

Art Not Moved by the Color of Money

Little-Seen Works by Dale Henry Come to Light in Exhibition Respecting Late Painter's Wishes at a Gallery in Transition

BY ANDY BATTAGLIA

On Tuesday, the painter Dale Henry returns to the New York art world he fled decades ago—this time on his own peculiar, posthumous terms.

When he died in 2011, alone in Virginia, his will stipulated that his work be left to local arts maven Alanna Heiss, to be used for noncommercial purposes or else be burned.

The arrangement came as a surprise to Ms. Heiss, but she accepted the works and staved off the flames. The result is “Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York,” an exhibition of works unseen since the 1970s or never shown at all. Perhaps fittingly, their resurrection on Tuesday marks the beginning of an end for Clocktower Gallery, which Ms. Heiss founded, as it prepares to vacate the TriBeCa space it has occupied since 1972.

Henry and Ms. Heiss worked together on exhibits at Clocktower and PS1, which she also founded, during his creative peak in the 1970s, but he escaped to rural isolation soon after.

“He became completely disenchanted with what happened to artists in New York,” Ms. Heiss said of Henry, who left his home in SoHo in dismay over the art world’s moneyed ways and mislaid attentions.

“He felt he was being misunderstood,” said Richard Nonas, a sculptor and colleague of Henry’s at the time. “His work was separate from what other painters were doing. He was investigating what



Alanna Heiss with a portrait of Dale Henry, whose work Ms. Heiss inherited, at the Clocktower Gallery. Right, Ms. Heiss goes over Henry’s own plans for the installation.



Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal (3)

painting meant, not in terms of style but as an object on the wall. He was thinking about this object that historically had been spoken of as a framework to display an image. He was interested in totality.”

Though he achieved early success and proved prescient in his conceptual ideas, Henry died in obscurity compared with contemporaries like Rob-

ert Ryman and Sol LeWitt. So the prospect of exhibiting him again presented certain challenges.

“In some cases, he has really outrageously precise installation guidelines, down to the inch. In other cases, he has general wishes but explicitly says that variations on the theme are fine,” said Beatrice Johnson, associate curator of

the Clocktower show, which will feature about 70% of Henry’s life’s work.

Other Henry works will figure into a second exhibition at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn in December, after a luxury real-estate deal forces the Clocktower Gallery from its TriBeCa location.

Asked if such a collusion of forces seems significant, Ms.

Heiss was philosophical. “I haven’t thought it about it that much because it’s the first show at the next space,” she said. “This show leaves the oldest existing alternative arts space and goes to the youngest one. That balance I like a lot.”

After that, the plan for Henry’s work is to abstain from the prospect of auction

or sale and to give it instead to artists, as per his noncommercial wishes.

“He didn’t want the work to become valuable and then we sell it or put it out, so that it enters the world of gallerists and dealers and collectors,” Ms. Heiss said. “The world that he painfully left, he did not want to re-enter—but he wanted his work to be saved.”

FINE ART | By Peter Plagens

Passion and Talent In Very Large Doses

Wangechi Mutu:
A Fantastic Journey

◆ **Brooklyn Museum**
200 Eastern Parkway
(718) 638-5000
Through March 9

This handsome exhibition by the Kenyan-born (1972), Brooklyn-based (as they say these days) artist Wangechi Mutu bites off a

chunk of intellectual ambition that would be difficult for any artist, no matter how talented and passionate, to fully chew. The museum says that Ms. Mutu’s subject matter includes “gender, race, war, colonialism, global consumption, and the exoticization of the black female body” and that the artist “encourages audiences to consider these mythical worlds [depicted in

her work] as places for cultural, psychological, and sociopolitical exploration and transformation.”

Ms. Mutu’s main medium is collage, but not those little tabletop pieces made with tweezers and a magnifying glass. She goes big, with snippets of photos from fashion, car and pornographic magazines (avoiding the really naughty bits), combined with ink, watercolor and glitter, making pictures that approach 8 feet in height.

Her images are mostly phantasmagoric female figures, in dangerously gorgeous surroundings, as with the bald, starkly white-faced woman, in “Riding Death in My Sleep” (2002), whose body is partially covered with a cheetah print, and who crouches in high-heeled boots on a dark globe covered with mushrooms. This work, and 2006’s “Le Noble Savage” (in which another female figure, clad in Kuba cloth, stands in high grass, reaching for the sky with a small palm tree in her hand), as well as many others, attest to the passion and talent of Ms. Mutu.

But despite the show’s title, Ms. Mutu is an artist, not a magician. She employs a few pictorial devices—e.g., pastings of full lips—that are at least pretty standard, if not overused. And she has influences: The African-American collageist Romare Bearden (whom Ms. Mutu cites), and illustrators H.R. Giger and Stephen Kroninger, traces of whom I see in her work. (Mentioning Mr. Kroninger is no swipe; he had a show at the Museum of Modern Art in 2007.)

Take the show’s announced content goals with a few grains of skepticism and you’ll be pleasantly disturbed by this very accomplished art-

Thomas Eggerer:
Gesture and Territory

◆ **Petzel**
456 W. 18th St., (212) 680-9467
Through Nov. 9

To riff on the old western movie line, “It’s quiet out there—too quiet”: It’s smart in there—too



Thomas Eggerer’s ‘Giro’ (2013) at Petzel.

smart. Which is to say that the new painting exhibition of Thomas Eggerer (b. 1963 in Germany) is so filled with inside moves that only somebody intimately familiar with the dekes and feints of contemporary painting could truly appreciate it.

His 11 large new pictures consist for the most part of loosely sketched figures of early adolescent boys seemingly occupied with some sort of campground labor, semi-subsumed by simple, colorful brushy backgrounds à la Willem de Kooning in his late-1950s landscapes, only thinner and brighter.

Mr. Eggerer used to paint more fully realized people in photographically derived settings, and these pictures represent a big change for him—a scaling back of finished figures into a style more ambivalently situated between representation

and abstraction. Despite their contrived offhandedness, Mr. Eggerer’s pictures are visually snappy and beautifully installed in Petzel’s generous space.

The big problem, however, is the feigned provisional drawing: It looks neither sincere enough to indicate real feeling, nor insincere enough to be clever. Mr. Eggerer has outsmarted himself.

Karl Wirsum

◆ **Derek Eller**
615 West 27th St., (212) 206-6411
Through Nov. 16

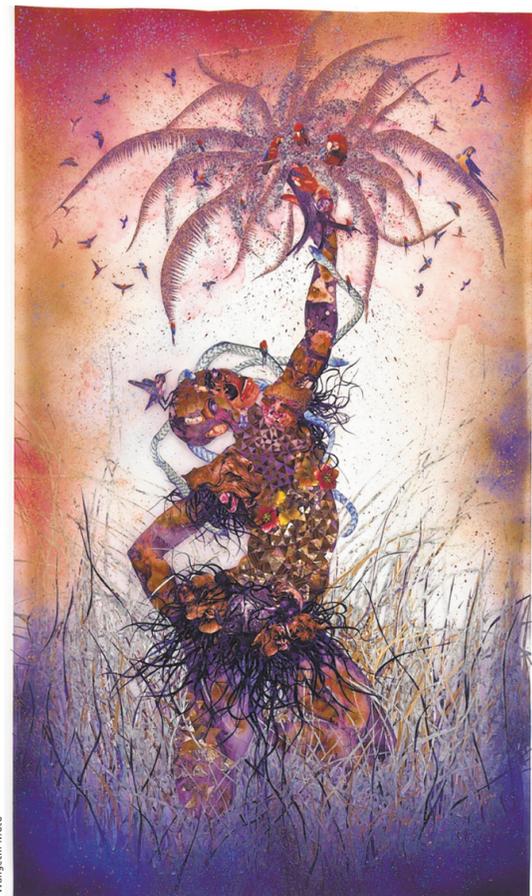
The old old guard of the venerable imagist group The Hairy Who, including the still-working artists Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson and Karl Wirsum, has always made Chicago a very different art city. The trademark of the Imagists is very careful painting of very weird—but

oddly nonthreatening—human beings. In the case of Mr. Wirsum (b. 1939), his crackling mix of inspirations—comic books, Japanese prints, pre-Columbian art and blues music—possesses more inventive clarity and chromatic horsepower than just about any art around that doesn’t have to be plugged in.

“Your Call Cannonball” (2011) gives us a pointy-tailed, huge-headed Humpty Dumpty sitting on a railing (which, in Mr. Wirsum’s mechanico-delirious world, is probably a tree branch) and about to catch a cannonball in his mouth.

The figure in “Chard” (2011) is either a green-haired late Elvis or a fashionable hostess in a long skirt. Either way, the satire is graphically lethal but psychologically tender. Vive la différence.

Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.



Wangechi Mutu’s ‘Le Noble Savage’ (2006) at the Brooklyn Museum.

The artist and Petzel, New York.