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Richard Boix
Da-Da (New York Dada Group)
1921
Museum of Modern Art



Kurt Schwitters
1. weisses Relief (1st White Relief)
1924/1927
Sprengel Museum Hannover



George Grosz
Metropolis
1916-1917
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid



CAPITAL ROUNDUP by Sidney Lawrence

Popular exhibitions are standard fare for D.C. museums in spring, but this year, a more esoteric issue also haunts these tourist temples. It centers on the questions of internationalism versus regionalism. How do you define each? Is there that big a difference? Which is better? Does anyone care?

As if to beg the issue, the **National Gallery of Art** offered up, in one fell swoop, the fecund, multinational "Dada" show (Feb. 19-May 14, 2006) and an exhibition of **Paul Cézanne's** obsessively regional landscapes Jan. 29-May 7, 2006), right at the same time.

The Dada show, packed onto two floors of **I.M. Pei's** sharp-edged East Building on the Mall, promised audiences a wallop of wickedness with its 25-foot-wide outdoor banner of **Marcel Duchamp's** tongue-in-cheek, moustachioed Mona Lisa, *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). (The original is card-sized, but that's showbiz.)

The Dada show wasn't all fun-and-games, of course. Sure, it had wacked-out masks and mannequins, you-are-getting-sleepy mechanical gizmos, ladies on film doing the Charleston and (most entertaining of all) gobbledygook sound poems in recorded recreations, emanating from booths.

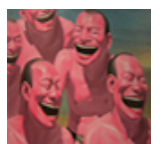
But Dada's essential source, at least at the outset, was the horrific war to end all wars. Lest we forget, the exhibition began with an exasperating loop of archival footage of World War I battle deaths, soldiers displaying disfigurements and terrorized civilians in gas masks.

These, plus the stew of psychologically extreme, politically biting artworks that followed, made parallels to the current anger and confusion over the Iraq War inevitable. So much so that op-ed political writer **Eugene Robinson** of the *Washington Post*, in an essay titled "Learning from Dada," made a point of urging Capital Hill lawmakers to think about that conflict by seeing the show.

Art historically, the exhibition showed how across-the-board creative innovation thrived, fluctuated and rebounded as Dada's anti-war, anti-art, anti-everything philosophy spread from its birthplace in Zurich (Cubist influences, performance events, graphics) to Berlin (Expressionism, collage), Hanover (crusty Merz), Cologne (geometric abstraction, proto-Surrealism), New York (found-object icons) and Paris (where an apparent revival of painting comes as a shock, since Dada leitmotifs are supposed to be experimental, temporary and jerry-rigged).

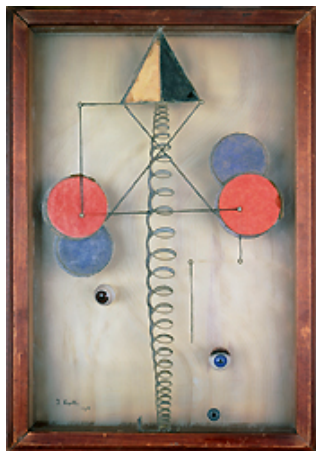
Exiting the show, my companion and I discussed which objects really stayed with us and could only come up with a handful (a delectably 3D **Kurt Schwitters** collage, a blood-red Berlin cityscape by **George Grosz**, **Otto Dix's** card-playing war cripples and a glass-box composition portrait of a clown with dangling eyeballs by a New Yorker named **Jean Crotti**).

So we remember Dada not for its great art but

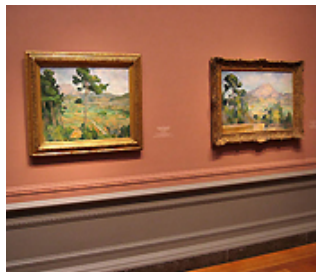




Otto Dix
Die Skatspieler (Skat Players),
 later titled *Kartenspielende
 Kriegskrüppel (Card-playing War
 Cripples)*
 1920
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,
 Nationalgalerie



Jean Crotti
Le Clown (The Clown)
 1916
 Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville
 de Paris
 Photo by Charles Delepelaire



Two of Paul Cézanne's views of
 Montagne Sainte-Victoire, in
 "Cézanne in Provence" at the
 National Gallery of Art



Paul Cézanne
*Montagne Sainte-Victoire Seen
 from les Lauves (Le Mont
 Sainte-Victoire vu des Lauves)*
 1904-1906



because it paved the way for later creative types -- the obvious ones and others, too. There are precedents for an **Ed Ruscha** word piece, **Jim Nutt's** grotesqueries, **Dan Steinhilber's** accumulationist sculpture, Denmark's **Dogma 95** with its impossibly skittering camerawork and all those illogical, right-on collage-caricatures by today's graphic artists (pure **Hannah Hoch**).

As for Dada's popular success, the National Gallery must have hoped for it but the galleries weren't particularly crowded on my two visits. I did observe, however, a docent doing her best to get beyond Dada's baby talk with a high-school group, and a number of gentlemen whom I decided were Senators and Congressmen. Hope so.

"Cézanne in Provence" at the National Gallery, on the other hand, was packed, proving that a late-19th-century French painter is a sure thing, even if he uses the same basic palette and fuzzier and fuzzier brushstrokes to paint the same basic trees, rocks, skies, vistas and occasional buildings.

However, once you surrender to the repetitive imagery and block out the crowds, the show is magic. This is particularly true in a central gallery, where Cézanne hones in on one quarry -- you can almost taste the dust, hear the crickets, see the eruptions of geology, sense the organisms fighting, watch decay and regeneration. Aix marks the spot!

These landscapes are both transcendent and regional. Cézanne grew up in Provence and was molded by it. He was also, lucky for us, a good artist.

What about Iowa and **Grant Wood**? A show at the **Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery** near the White House (through July 16) lets us be the judge. Titled, somewhat misleadingly, "Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of 'American Gothic,'" the show uses that iconic painting of 1930 (the loan of which, from the **Art Institute of Chicago**, was iffy until the last-minute) as a sort of dangling carrot to explore the artist's milieu, which is to say Iowa, Iowa and more Iowa.

In some 50 artworks and decorative-art projects by this premier American Regionalist, plus personal mementoes and a photo-evocation of his studio, we tour yesteryear's Iowa, from the haughtiness of the haute-bourgeoisie and promise of its spring (after those nasty winters) to the curious pride in corn (a mural and even a corn cob chandelier) and the bulbous, not-a-blade-of-grass-out-of-place landscape (I've been there and it's true).

Except for the deliciously grandma-ish *Victorian Survival* (1931), prescient found-object flowerpots from the 1920s and *American Gothic* (which you have to love for its grumpiness), I was most taken with the landscapes. *Young Corn* (1931), with its undulating fields, ultra-neat ridges and artichoke trees, invokes no less than a nubile male nude awakening from slumber; it's subliminal Surrealism at its best, paralleling the subtle kinkiness in the hillocks of **Roger Brown**.

Wood, an emotional loner who lived with his mother and frequently used his sister as a model (for this show's central painting, among others), could squeeze a crazy, inverted energy from Iowa's landscape. Like Cézanne in Provence? Why not?

A retrospective of **Robert Bechtle**, down the street at the **Corcoran Gallery of Art** (through June 4), might as well be called "Bechtle in Alameda." That's the San Francisco suburb he grew up and lived in for





Sketch for *American Gothic* by Grant Wood, on display in "Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of 'American Gothic'" at the Renwick Gallery



Grant Wood
Victorian Survival
1931
Dubuque Museum of Art



Grant Wood
Young Corn
1931
Courtesy Cedar Rapids Museum of Art



Robert Bechtle
Alameda Chrysler
1981
Meisel Family Collection, New York



Robert Bechtle
Watsonville Olympia
1977
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Gallery Paule Anglim and Barbara Gladstone Gallery

years. Remember **Malvina Reynolds'** folk-music ditty, *Little Boxes*? It was written about such relentlessly nondescript places in the Bay Area. Forget Kerouac, Ginsburg and North Beach cafés -- we're talking showroom-shiny period cars, one-story stuccos, treeless streets and oh-so-bland people.

Bechtle's Photo Realism may invoke this antiseptic world, but there's an underlying humanity here, too. Some have compared it to **Edward Hopper's** but I wouldn't go that far. It's more like he's a genre painter with an eye for architecture, focused regionally and socio-economically on the Bay Area middle class. The poses and interactions among individuals or groups in a driveway, patio, garden or living room is effecting and authentic. You may feel uncomfortable at first, but eventually you want to share the moment, to enjoy the surroundings, to become friends.

Besides, Bechtle's feel for the light and shapes of Northern California is as convincing as **Thiebaud's** or **Diebenkorn's** (when he lived there), and who can resist that?

Outside the D.C. museum beat, a three-part group show held in April at three different galleries honed in on international neo-conceptual art with an activist, utopian edge. "Other than Art" was at **G Fine Art** and the **Curator's Office** on 14th Street, and **Provisions Library**, an arts-for-social-change facility near Dupont Circle. It was guest-curated by **Milena Kalinovska**, the Czech-born Hirshhorn staffer and one-time director of **ICA Boston**.

I went to this show to see how internationally aware artists from the Americas, Europe and Asia engage current issues. The black stenciling of *Soldier Doily Trim* by American **Elissa Levy** (at both G and Provisions) is a harsh antiwar statement, sweetly disguising a pattern of guns and soldiers within its tidy borders. At Provisions, **Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla**, who make their home in Puerto Rico, present photos of corporate-logo footprints on sand (a variation on an early **Felix Gonzalez-Torres** work) and wacky video-loop of a guy buzzing through waterlands in an upside-down table powered by an outboard motor (gotta try that!) are nominally about the U.S. war machine's environmental bashing of Vieques -- but also powerful comment on humankind's general disregard for nature.

In terms of sheer poetry, *Windmills; Because Every City Has the Right to Be Called Utopia (Thread Drawing Series)* (2001), by the Havana-based Cuban artist **Carlos Garaicoa**, can't be beat. Impossibly ethereal, this monofilament wall drawing depicts those strange energy-producing propeller towers you see in California, Denmark and other windy places. It's like staring into a future of modern life, perhaps a rosy one, perhaps not.

In conversation, Kalinovska characterized the assembled artists as "dreamers who strike out, in little ways, against global corporate culture." I like it, except that more often than not, the work is too visually chaste, not personally revealing and thematically obtuse to engage any audience beyond the cognoscenti, much less effect social change.

No such disconnection comes from "Visual Politics: The Art of Engagement," a much bigger group show of mostly West Coast protest art since World War II. It's the **San Jose Museum of Art's** spin-off project of a new book by guru Berkeley art historian **Peter**



Elissa Levy
Soldier Doily Trim
2005



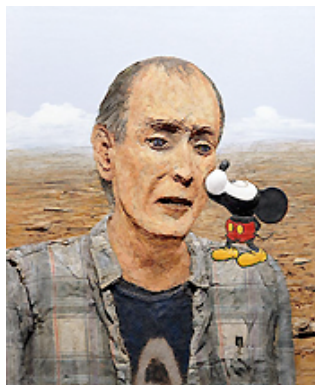
Allora & Calzadilla
Land Mark (Foot Prints)
2001-2002



Carlos Garaicoa
Windmills; Because Every City has the Right to be called Utopia (Thread Drawing Series)
2001



Enrique Chagoya
When Paradise Arrived
1988
Collection of di Rosa Preserve,
Napa



Llyn Foulkes
The Corporate Kiss

Selz and it just landed at the **Katzen Arts Center's American University Museum** (through July 29) near Embassy Row.

OK, so I help the A.U. museum with PR and grew up on the West Coast, but I stand behind Selz's scholarly spin, which holds that California, more so than any non-New York region, is prone to tuned-in, activist art because art schools and alternative creative venues there, in the absence of an entrenched gallery system and powerful critics, have encouraged it.

Activist art from the Midwest and East is anything but rare -- think of **Leon Golub**, **Barbara Kruger**, **Sue Coe**, the **Guerrilla Girls** and **Adrian Piper** -- but the spectacle offered by these Californians, which walks you through Nazism, the Vietnam War, Gay rights, the women's movement, identity politics, the Cold War, racism and environmental degradation, to name a few, makes a strong case for a West Coast *geist*.

True to Southern California, Mickey Mouse pops up twice. In **Enrique Chagoya's** *When Paradise Arrived*, the Disney character's giant hand, with "English Only" inscribed on its finger, flicks away a Virgin-of-Guadalupe Chicano innocent. In **Llyn Foulkes' Corporate Kiss**, Mickey is an unwanted nemesis and symbol of lowbrow America.

Tamiko Thiel and Zara Houshmand's *Beyond Manzanar* (2000) is a virtual reality sound-and-screen journey through a California labor camp where images of displacement and discrimination lead to memories and fantasies, and vice-versa. The pairing of marginalized ethnic groups -- interred Japanese-Americans during World War II and Arab-Americans since the 1970s Iran hostage crisis -- is odd but compelling. This is powerful stuff.

New York eco-feminist **Helène Aylon** (who might be said to "qualify" because she lived a decade in L.A.) contributes *Bridge of Knots II* (1982-2006), an anti-nuclear performance-based project with tied-together pillowcases, inscribed with dreams and nightmares about the a-bomb by Soviet, American and Hiroshima-surviving women. Even if its funky appearance caused a nearby TV station to inquire whether the object was some kind of college prank (!), the work, which dangles from the museum's curved façade above its sculpture garden, is more aptly read as a weeping willow or series of fire-escape ropes signaling danger and death.

Philippine-born artist **Manuel Ocampo** is represented by the Christianity-bashing, icon-loaded *Untitled (Burnt-Out Europe)* (1992), as in your face as you can get. **Dinh Q. Le's** *Father and Son* (2001) interweaves head shots of actors **Martin and Charlie Sheen** as Americans in Vietnam with actual villagers from that country, where the artist was born in 1968.

You're dying to know, aren't you? Does anyone take on Bush? Yes, that would be **Clinton Fein**, a San Francisco artist who recently showed at Chelsea's **Axis Gallery**. One of two digital prints, *Like Apple Fucking Pie* (2004), uses an inflammatory favorite, the American flag, but don't be fooled by the stripes (texts from the shockingly graphic Abu Ghraib report) or stars (50 profiles of the iconic hooded prisoner on a box dangling electric wires -- yikes!). This work has a stunning, subtly nuanced sense of color and composition.

Fein's website, www.annoy.com, is relentlessly anti-Bush and a lot of other things, too. This get-tough attitude, in the "Art of Engagement" tradition, is very

2001
Collection of the San Jose
Museum of Art



Hélène Aylon
Bridge of Knots II
1983-2006
American University Museum,
Katzen Arts Center

West Coast but also has the punch of South Africa, land of Apartheid and diamond mines, where the artist was born and raised. Which brings us back to the issue at hand. International? Regional? Speaking for myself, I don't much care. Just so long as it's good art.

SIDNEY LAWRENCE is an artist and critic living in Washington, D.C.



Dinh Q. Lé
Father and Son
2001
Collection of Peter and Beverly
Lipman



Clinton Fein
Like Apple Fucking Pie
2004

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