

by Mark Blickley



EGG HEAD

My initial exposure to the New York art scene came during the mid-seventies while sipping hot chocolate in a mid-town coffee shop. Directly in front of my booth was a xeroxed theater advertisement of a nude woman. Her lovely back was facing me. Underneath the squatting beauty, in bold back letters, I read the words, NAKED LUNCH.

Hours later I was sitting in a gloomy East Village basement, anxiously awaiting a full frontal evaluation of the lead actress. A ticket only cost a few dollars.

Turns out the poster that enticed me into the world of drama was an old and famous Penelope Ashley photograph. And not only wasn't there anyone naked in the play, it had absolutely nothing to do with food. Although I didn't really understand a lot of what was being said and enacted on stage, I was intrigued. I've always loved puzzles. *Naked Lunch* addicted me to off-off Broadway.

I threw myself into the New York art scene. It was exhilarating. The more I didn't understand a subject matter, the harder I fought not to lose my concentration, enthusiasm, or respect for the creators and their creations. Because of a romantic liaison with a dancer, I attended numerous modern dance recitals where I absorbed the conceit of movement being as important as dance.

Performance art baffled me. Quite often I couldn't offer up a sentence about the artist's intent. This would bother me, but

usually the presentations were so beautifully crafted, layered with such exquisite sound and lights and words and sets that I shrugged off the obscure meanings in favor of a kind of obsessive energy that exploded into artistic anarchy.

I had a head-on collision with the plastic arts in Morocco. I met an entire summer school of painters in Tangier, ranging in age from eighteen to seventy. Their skill level varied greatly, but their dedication to their art was inspiring. I was amused and somewhat baffled over their excitement of North African light.

New York's School of Visual Arts had leased work space and living quarters inside a large, protected compound. Many nights I would visit up to a dozen artists as they toiled inside their studios. Some artists attacked their canvasses joyously, others worked with a seriousness that approached anger.

I became infatuated with, and later married, an exotic looking woman who made small collages from objects she found in the street—cigarette packages, pieces of fabric, coins, glass, etc. She introduced me to process as well as product.

When I returned to the states I did an exhaustive reconnaissance of most of the art galleries and museums in New York. I got a crash course in art history when I discovered the German expressionists and pointed individuals like Alice Neel and Milton Avery. Joseph Cornell's busy boxes enchanted me and I didn't know why. By chance I walked into a 57th Street gallery and was thrilled by the work of a man named Soutine. I later read that he smelled quite foul.

Contemporary artists, I was having a problem with. SoHo

was peaking. Mary Boone replaced Castelli as *the* art dealer. Most of the work I viewed left me feeling empty, stupid and somewhat intimidated. I didn't get it. By the time the East Village "Bad Art" exploded on the scene, I was more angry than confused.

In the interim I had become friendly with quite a few artists, artists who had spent tens of thousands of dollars on prestigious art school educations. Every year a handful of these artists would submit pieces—you're allowed up to three—to the annual Small Works Show. And each year they'd get uni-

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formly rejected.

I participated in the annual rejection lament for three consecutive years. The lament was usually held at Bradley's in the Village, and in between the bass lines of a jazz trio and disappearing pitchers of beer, we'd all rage on about the corruption and commercialization of the art world.

But I was changing. A decade of fervent art following and worship started to sour me. I taught myself to rely on my own powers of expectation and introspection, and most of the artists I knew and the products they created left me disgusted. I thought that joy and human understanding had been totally excluded from the work of the majority of my friends and peers.

At the age of thirty-one in 1984, I wrote a play that was produced in New York after winning a theater contest, and around the time of the February 2, 1985 Small Works opening, I had a short story anthologized in a book. So

you see, I was honestly trying to implement my ideas; I was attempting to build something, not to simply knock a thing down.

Late in 1984 the girlfriend I met in Morocco and I viewed an exhibit in an upscale SoHo space that was so boring and amateurish I asked the gallery sitter if he could explain why the work was being exhibited. He left his desk in a huff and disappeared into a back room. When he returned he was clutching a thick pamphlet that he shoved at us and told us to read. It would explain everything, he said.

We read it. It was such a convoluted muck of art-speak that it confused me even more than the work it was trying to describe. When I returned the pamphlet with my observations, the gallery sitter's face turned purple with rage. He informed me that he had written the pamphlet himself, and if we couldn't understand his words, we were the deficient ones, not the works of art.

Well, a couple of years earlier I would have been intimidated and shuffled off with my head bowed. I insisted he explain the value of the work to me, in his own words. He insisted I re-read his writing on the subject. I told him I could spend a day reading his words and still wouldn't have a clue as to why the exhibit was produced. Just give me a few sentences, simple sentences, about your feelings and reasons for the work's importance, I pleaded.

The gallery sitter stormed off into the back room and stayed there until my girlfriend and I left. I was furious. I

wasted years and years being intimidated and misled by a contemporary court of the Emperor's New Clothes.

When I returned home that evening I was upset. My girlfriend immediately began to put the finishing touches on one of the pieces she was submitting to the 1985 Small Works jury. It was her fourth attempt at gaining acceptance.

"I'm going to enter the competition," I announced.

"But you're not an artist," she replied. "You draw like a kid. Even your handwriting never evolved past the third grade."

"That's because I'm left-handed," I said defensively. "And because I'm not an artist is why I'll have a better chance of getting in than you and your friends. I bet the curator will be starved for ideas. Technique and talent I don't have, but ideas, unobscured ideas—no problem. It'll be revolutionary."

She smirked and returned to her art work. I walked into the next room and removed a small drawer from an ancient roll top desk I had rescued from the street. Then I grabbed a hammer and some tiny nails.

Because of a clerk's job at an Upper Westside chi-chi toy store, I had a small arsenal of weird and wonderful stuff with which to entertain the many children in my life. I emptied my bag of fun onto the floor and awaited artistic inspiration.

The Muse spoke. Eggs. Rubber eggs. Perfectly crafted rubber eggs peeked up at me from the colorful heap. I plucked a half-dozen of them out of the pile. Then I noticed tiny babies from Italy that were exquisitely made from hard plastic. I scooped up a handful of naked infants and smiled. I had found a theme.

The last ingredient I pulled from the colorful pile were two sets of soft plastic contortionists known as Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Molded to look like a stereotypical 1950's mother and father, these little dolls were renowned for their elasticity. My co-workers used to thrill

in twisting Mr. and Mrs. Smith into some very explicit and compromising positions.

I thumbed through a few of my girlfriend's food magazines that she used for still lifes and cut out two symbolic pictures that I pasted inside the upper left and lower right hand corners of the drawer. One photograph was of cherries; the other was eggplants. Because of the egg/food theme I also pasted 1950's railroad dining car promotional post-cards across all four sides of the drawer.

I took a razor blade and slit open four rubber eggs, placing a protruding baby inside each perforation. Then I nailed a pagoda of four baby emerging eggs to the lower left corner of the drawer.

Next came the two Mr. and Mrs. Smiths. I had one couple facing each other in the lower right-hand corner hoisting the other couple on their shoulders. The top couple balanced two intact rubber eggs stacked in their outstretched arms.

The final and crowning achievement of the piece was naming the art work. I asked my girlfriend for one of the extra entry forms she always kept and penned in *Procreation* above the word title. She was shocked that I had completed an original work of art in thirty-eight minutes, and quite confident that it would be dismissed by the curator, Alan Stone of New York's Alan Stone Gallery.

The next day we left together to drop off our artwork at the Grey Gallery. She took the maximum allowance of three works. I had *Procreation*. As we were about to leave the apartment, my eye caught a piece of paper I had recently taped to the wall above my desk. It was a distorted photocopied page from a recent short story of mine based on my experiences at Tennessee Williams' wake, "Visiting Tennessee."

The copy machine had spewed out a grayish piece of paper with floating lines of type that swept across the page. Each

sentence snaked into a blur. It so happened that particular page in the story contained some titillating words and phrases—erection, masturbating, penis, sweet sweat soaked—that were still visible to the reader.

I kept the page because I loved the paper's gray color degradations as well as the roller coaster movement of the lines of type. But as I read each sentence for the first time, I was struck by how gracefully each line slid into extinction, how each thought literally disappeared before my eyes. I snatched the misfit xerox off my wall and proclaimed it to be my second entry into the Small Works show.

"I shall title it *Writer's Block*," I proclaimed.

"You're crazy," said my girlfriend as I locked the door behind us. "Don't embarrass yourself by submitting it."

I shrugged off her criticism. "What's wrong with it? It's a found object. The color is lovely. And my interpretation makes perfect sense. If any of these pieces has a chance of getting into the show, this one does." And I believed it, figuring the less an artist had to do with a work the better his chances of success in modern art.

She laughed all the way to the gallery.

A few weeks later we received our notification in the mail. My girlfriend got her answer first. A miracle! After years of trying, two of her three pieces were selected. The following day I got the word—one of my works was in the show.

I was ecstatic! I had proved that a non-artist could gain artistic acceptance because the art world was so bereft and hungry for something tangible, something with some recognizable thought behind it despite the simplicity of the idea and subject matter.

The selection announcement did not state which works were chosen. A pick-up date was issued for artists to retrieve their rejected pieces. My girlfriend and I had the same retrieval date.

I couldn't wait to learn which of my masterpieces had scaled the art world barrier.

My success had the effect of dampening my girlfriend's joy. After all, my foray into the art world was to prove that real artists need not apply. If I was accepted into the show I had planned to write a series of scathing articles denouncing the current state of the art. I was going to strike a blow for true, frustrated artists everywhere.

But now my girlfriend made it into the show and she was upset with me. My acceptance effectively devalued her work. I had already written her a mock bio that she loved. I was going to publish it. But now that she was going to show her work in New York she forbade me to use it. It suddenly wasn't so funny or biting anymore. I constructed this false bio as if it were a press release:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

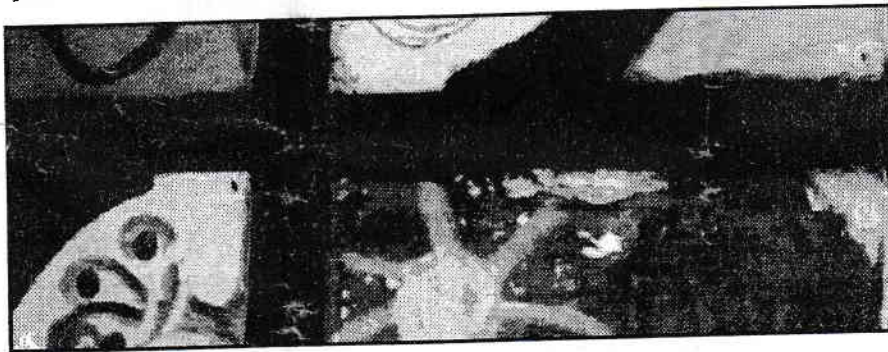
TYRONE HEMHOLTZ GALLERY
"fine arts forever"

The paintings of Christine Karapetian (1954-2021) reinforces the premise that everything transitory is merely a smile. Everything we see is a proposal, a possibility, an expedient. The real truth, to begin with, remains invisible beneath the surface. The colors that captivate us are not lighting, but light. The graphic universe consists of light and shadow. The diffused clarity of slightly overcast weather is richer in phenomena than a sunny day. It is difficult to capture and represent this, because the moment is so fleeting. Ms. Karapetian has penetrated our soul with the formal fuse of THOUGH I'M SCAT I STILL LOVE LITTER BOXES, using organic materials (ugh!) on canvass.

Simple motion strikes us as banal. Karapetian's work eliminates the time element. Yesterday and tomorrow are simultaneous. Her FRISBEE AS CHOCOLATE CHIP and UP THE SCHOZZIN NOZZIN overcomes the time element by a retrograde motion that would penetrate

consciousness, reassuring us that a renaissance might still be thinkable.

Early works indicate her demonical visions melt with the celestial. This dualism shall not be treated as such, but in its complementary oneness. The conviction is already and always present. The demonical is already peeking through here and there and can't be kept down. For truth asks that all elements be presented at once, as is exemplified by the artist's *ORGASM SEEPS FROM DAMAGED BOOT* and damned near didactic with the completion of her last canvass, *NEW ENGLAND NEUTERS*, as well as conveyed through the lesser sculptures commemorating her period of Buddhist fanaticism of the late '90s.



Christine Karapetian was born in The Bronx, New York, in 1954. Her first contact with the art world came at an early age. In 1955, at the height of the bohemian "BEAT" tradition, Mrs. Alice Karapetian was changing the future painter's diapers in the Women's Room at Crotona Park when Allen Ginsberg and Jackson Pollock, both in drag, each asked the artist's mother for a dime and admired the streak stained diaper Christine had created.

After a period of twenty-two years during which time Christine did not create art because of her paralyzing fear that ferrets would seek her out and defecate on her paint brushes, Ms. Karapetian went into a frenzied period of work that lasted until her death at age sixty-seven, when she was bitten by a rabid woodchuck while collecting organic materials for an environmental collage.

Not only was Ms. Karapetian a pro-

lific painter and sculptress, she also published many articles and essays of art history and criticism, as well as an acclaimed autobiography, *I'm Not Paranoid Because My Fears Are Real*, and a novella, *Stories I Stole From My Father*.

This novella led to a thirty year court battle with her brother, Hakop, when he discovered that the book was pirated from the uncopyrighted Armenian fiction of their father. The case was still in litigation at the time of the artist's death and was said to be a major reason for renewed interest in Karapetian among art critics, who cited the novella title as the ultimate statement in truth, thus earning Ms. Karapetian a new and deeper examination of her work.

Tyrone Hemholtz is proud of being the first gallery sponsoring a Karapetian retrospective, and reminds patrons that the Karapetian Karamels, like the ones depicted in her gastronomical collage, *GUILT*, are on sale in the lobby.

My girlfriend and I went together to pick up our rejected art works. I secretly hoped that *Writer's Block* was the one that made it in.

She handed the clerk her ticket first. A moment later she was handed her banished painting. When I gave my ticket to the clerk I waited a good twenty minutes until the clerk reappeared.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blickey," he said, "but I can't seem to find your piece."

"Will you continue your search and please hurry?" I said. "I have to be at work in fifteen minutes." The suspense over which piece had made it in was killing me.

The clerk returned in about five minutes. "I'm sorry, sir. There seems to have been a mistake."

My face dropped and I look over at Christine, who was beaming. The clerk cleared the embarrassment out of his voice. "Both of your pieces have been accepted," he said.

Christine looked like she was about to cry. She later told me that she expected the mistake to be that none of my works had been selected for the exhibition. She admitted feeling crushed that I had aced my two pieces.

I had a lot of fun the day of the opening. I dressed totally in black, complete with a black beret loaned to me by a retired jazz musician who had worn it proudly during gigs in the 1950's. My footwear was a pair of old boots that I dripped paint on to. I also hard boiled two dozen eggs and wrote on them: **Mark Blickey, 1952 - , A Retrospective.** I passed out these edible works of art to people on the subway and at the Opening.

The humor of the event evaporated for me when my artist friends, who had so recently applauded my attempt to prove that the art world discriminated against "real" artists, viewed my work hanging on the gallery walls and collectively proclaimed that, "I indeed did have an incredible intuitive talent for the plastic arts."

That statement is totally false. And I have the proof that it's untrue; it's packed away in a suitcase at the bottom of my closet.

My righteous artist comrades, instead of taking encouragement and comfort from my "success," massaged their bruised egos by perpetrating a lie. Much to my surprise they turned out to be as fake as the institutions I was lampooning.

As a result of this experience I penned a play entitled *The World's Greatest Saxophone Player*. It's a monodrama that chronicles the rise and fall of one Eric Tesler, a saxophonist who plays his instrument without using a reed. ❖