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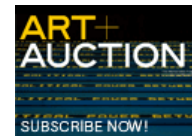
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January 28, 2007

Installation view of "Whale" (2006)
Jacco Olivier; at Victoria Miro Gallery

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Letter from London: What's On In the East End

by Meredith Etherington-Smith

LONDON, Jan. 24, 2007—While the big uptown exhibitions start rolling later this week, in downtown the East End already has plenty to offer the keen collector—and not just in the realm of post-graduate art.

Two older artists, **Bernard Cohen** and **Michael Simpson**, who both got their start in the 1960s, have great shows running at **Flowers East** and **David Risley Gallery**.

Cohen first came to prominence in the early 1960s with the "Situation" group show, which, in his words, "followed the '40s and '50s as years of light following years of darkness." It has also been heralded as a key moment London's 1960s art scene. Now, Flowers East is showing Cohen's paintings from that era through Feb. 11.

The works (looking remarkably like scans of the labyrinthine interior workings of Cohen's brain) revel in the linear, in fragmentation, in what the artist describes as "almost chaos." There is no specific subject here, just pattern—or non-pattern—color and texture.

It's an impressive and welcome show and it's astonishing to realize that these works, which appear so contemporary today, were made nearly half a century ago.

Meanwhile, Simpson's "Bench Paintings" at David Risley through March 4 marks the artist's first exhibition in London since his solo debut at the **Serpentine Gallery** more than 20 years ago—and it is high time.

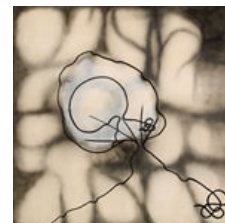
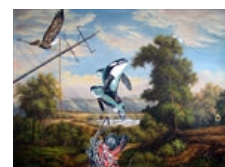
For nearly the whole of this intervening period, Simpson has been working at his studio near Bath on the huge "Bench" series: a set of monumental, disturbing works with great presence.

The artist himself describes them as *vanitas* paintings, relating as they do to his interest in the dark doings of religious history and in particular to **Giordano Bruno**, the medieval philosopher who, after enduring eight years of torture by the Inquisition, was finally burnt at the stake in Rome.

In these enormous paintings (the gallery was rebuilt to house them) the bench—or just its shadow—is used on the canvas as a fixed form, through which Simpson explores the very nature of painting itself, its form, color and composition.

The bench also becomes a symbol of endless waiting for an unknown fate, implying confinement in a hostile environment with no beginning and no end. These are dark, sinister, emotional works and they must be seen.

The Israeli artist **Shay Kun** lives and works in New York, so it is, I suppose, understandable that he has used the dreamlike romantic landscapes of the Hudson River School, particularly the work of **Thomas Cole**, as a basis for some subversive but painterly goings-on at the **Seventeen** gallery beginning Jan. 31.

"Alonging"
Bernard Cohen; at Flowers East"Generation"
Bernard Cohen; at Flowers East"Outburst" (2006)
Shay Kun; at Seventeen Gallery"Encounters" (2006)
Shay Kun; at Seventeen Gallery

Into Shay Kun's masterly evocations of the early 19th-century Hudson River Valley come modern-day interlopers in the form of interventions, which are out of scale and out of context—geographically, historically and socially. Painted in acrylic, a wolf stands on a burning car, whales dance above a mangled wreck, and huge birds perch on overturned telephone lines.

The contrast between the naivety of the acrylic interventions and the cool and beautiful landscapes in which Shay Kun sets them is extraordinary, setting up entirely contemporary tensions and conflicts between a romanticized past and an ugly and threatening present.

In his show at the **Victoria Miro Gallery** through Feb. 10, **Jacco Olivier** combines traditional painting with filmmaking, most notably in his centerpiece *Whale*. The seven-minute film is split across three projections that span some 12 meters, and in it, Olivier recreates the whale's movements so that the creature disappears and reappears in a painterly field.

As with Shay Kun and **Jonathan Wateridge** (a painter who creates 3-D scenes by employing receding perspectives on multiple sheets of glass), it seems to me that Olivier is also seeking a way of painting that springs from the classical figurative or landscape tradition. But by combining it with other methods, he uses the age-old technique in a contemporary and challenging way.

A challenge of a different sort is "Behemoth" at the **Danielle Arnaud Gallery** in South London through Feb. 25. Arnaud's gallery is a large, handsome Georgian terraced house with all its original architectural details intact. Into this enlightened world creep alien presences in the work of six artists.

Andy Harper's intrusion takes the shape of wallpaper painted directly onto the venerable walls of the house, referencing that extremely sinister tale "The Yellow Wallpaper," in which the heroine's increasing obsession with the pattern on the walls of her room ends in madness.

Then there are **Sophie Newell's** found and made objects, inspired by the classical language of ornament. In the house's original incarnation these forms would have been expressed in pristine white plasterwork. Here, the trophies are expressed in distressed industrial *trouvés*, which gives the house the required air of controlled subversion.

This is an extremely interesting show—and at the very least, it could convince collectors who do not live in minimalist boxes that contemporary art can find a harmonious home against 18th-century architecture.

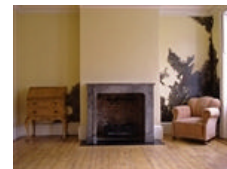
Image credits (numbered from top): Victoria Miro Gallery (1,6,7); Flowers East (2,3); Seventeen Gallery (4,5); Danielle Arnaud Gallery (8,9)



"Whale" (2006)
Jacco Olivier; at Victoria Miro Gallery



"Home" (2006)
Jacco Olivier; at Victoria Miro Gallery



"Cloaca Maxima" (2007)
Andy Harper; at Danielle Arnaud Gallery



"Spoils" (2007)
Sophie Newell; at Danielle Arnaud Gallery