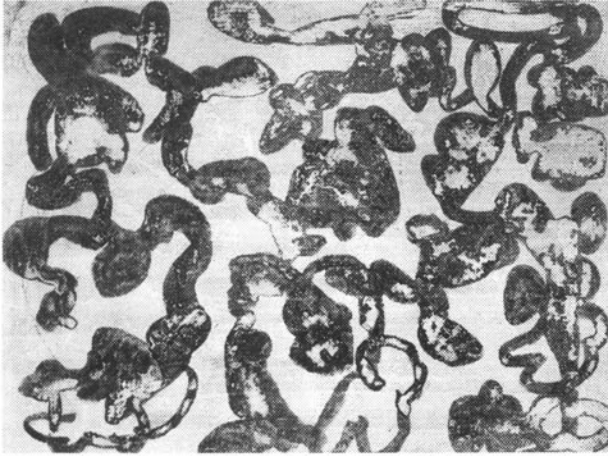


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"Tontine" in Dumbo



Bo Joseph, "Coagula, 1998"

Often our interest in one artist can lead us to others of similar inclination and merit. Certainly this was true in the case of Bo Joseph, Todd Bartel, Michael Oatman, and James Scott, who recently jointly curated and exhibited together in the four artist exhibition "Tontine," at Hermen Goode Gallery, 68 Jay Street, in Brooklyn.

We first first encountered Bo Joseph's work three or so years ago in one of the "Talent" shows at Allan Stone Gallery and again, last year, in "Paper Invitational II" at Woodward Gallery. In both shows we were impressed by Joseph's vigorous mixed media drawings, with their elegantly distressed surfaces, liverish colors, and flowing, somewhat swollen, intestinal-looking linear forms.

In the "Tontine" exhibition, Joseph impressed us further with a series of mixed media works in which the borrowing of forms from artist history and indigenous cultures (primarily African or Native American) goes beyond appropriation into more fertile areas of personal expression and invention.

Joseph's "Inferno" drawings, for example, merge three sources of inspiration: the immortal poem by Dante Alighiera, Robert Rauschenberg's suite of drawings on the same subject, and the line drawings of Sandro Botticelli. In Joseph's drawings, all of these influences are transmogrified in compositions composed of maze-like linear configurations that flow and swell with characteristic grace and force. Likewise, in "Solve et Coagula," an artists book, Joseph weaves a variety of painted shapes and stenciled symbols related to African artifacts over antique engravings of mechanical gadgets, creating a compelling synthesis of the practical and the spiritual.

New York Notebook 15 & 16

Like Bo Joseph, the other artists in the "Tontine" exhibition employ an eclectic range of imagery, along with collage, layering, and other mixed media techniques to create works that resonate with meaning.

Closest to Joseph's work in spirit and execution are the mixed media works of Todd Bartel, who juxtaposes meticulous watercolor images of miniature landscapes with bold abstract forms painted in black ink over book pages from Ovid's "Metamorphosis."

Bartel's way of transforming printed texts is also reminiscent of Tom Phillips' book work: "A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel." In addition, Bartel creates box assemblages frankly influenced by Joseph Cornell. Like his cohorts in "Tontine," who issued a joint exhibition statement saying "We believe that any ground laid to this point in history is ours to surmount," he borrows freely from his predecessors and his peers to build a foundation for his own art.

Michael Oatman, also known for his large-scale multimedia installations, comes closest to a post-Pop sensibility in his collages, where ironic photographic images are defaced by lively gestural elements. James Scott, an architect as well as a painter, explores themes of metamorphosis through geometric forms. In his "Development of a Cube" series, cool formal configurations painted in muted tones morph into emotionally-laden symbols such as crosses and swastikas.

Although all four artists in the "Tontine" group studied with Alfred DeCredico, an influential teacher at the Rhode Island School of Design, and espouse a similar artistic philosophy, their distinctly different approaches to mixed media made the exhibition varied and exciting.