

CURATOR'S STATEMENT FOR "PURE PAINTING 3"

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San Diego Public Library

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This exhibition is dedicated to Barbara Walbridge (1914-2010), visual arts philanthropist, art collector, supporter of San Diego artists, and aspiring painter. Barbara will be missed by the citizens of San Diego who benefitted greatly from her generosity.

"Pure Painting 3" is an attempt to gather together a representative selection of the best paintings created by artists living in the San Diego area. The range of styles, subjects, and concepts showcased is as diverse as the artists themselves. In terms of craftsmanship, all of the paintings demonstrate formidable skills at handling paint media, whether painterly or polished. The only limitations imposed on "Pure Painting 3" were dictated by the size of the exhibition space walls. Consequently, most of the works on display are modestly scaled and, with great difficulty, the final selection of invited artists was pared down to fourteen. That being said, the works comprising "Pure Painting 3" are wonderful – and sometimes astounding – achievements. This becomes especially apparent in the context of an era when the decades-long scarcity of rigorous fundamental studio training available to young artists has taken a terrible toll, and the pervasiveness of digital media has begun desensitizing our aesthetics.

Dan Adams has garnered critical acclaim and the adoration of animal lovers everywhere for his small (typically 8 by 10 inches) paintings of dogs not doing much of anything but being dogs. Loosely and quickly rendered in an expressionist style reminiscent of the Bay Area Figurative Movement, these works are remarkable for their spontaneity and simple and direct approach to their subjects. Lesser known, but equally impressive, are his larger works, especially those depicting humans. For those, Adams favors people strolling along the beach, sunbathing, or walking their dogs. At their best, Adams' canvases are exuberant and glorious demonstrations of the power of unfettered brushwork and the expressive qualities of paint.

Constance Athens' landscapes are dynamic, colorful, and beautifully painted. The confidence and spontaneity with which she wields her brush impart an uncommon vitality. Many of Athens' landscapes verge on pure abstractionism, making them even more engaging. Her use of color is fearless and sophisticated and she strives to remove from her images elements that are not visually necessary. *Retreat* is a delightful depiction of a wooded glen rendered with a minimum of brushstrokes and dominated by yellow-greens and lavenders. Among Athens' most adventuresome paintings is *Torrey Pines*, a loose, painterly composition whose green, purple, and blue imagery suggests its namesake, but is daringly

rendered on field of phosphorescent red-orange. A product of prestigious art schools in New York and Washington, D.C., Athens counts among her influences Milton Avery, Bonnard, Robert Henri, Will Barnett, Matisse, and Wolf Kahn. Among her most charming works (they will be featured in a future Visual Arts Program exhibition) is a series of small, plein air landscape studies painted on paper.

Marsha Boston's artistry is rooted in photography and film, which she abandoned to pursue painting. During the last two decades, Boston's art has centered on the myths and concepts that have defined man's relationship to nature. Her particular concerns involve the environment, especially threats to the food supply. These include the use of herbicides and pesticides and the application of genetic engineering to crops. Boston has extensively studied herbal medicine and shamanism as practiced by the indigenous peoples of California. Playing into this is her severe allergies to most paints that artists use, a disadvantage she was eventually able to overcome. One of the most beautiful and distinctive aspects of Boston's paintings is her use of line, often described as Twombly-esque (a reference to Cy Twombly, an important American artist whose abstract works blur the line between drawing and painting). Boston's line is delicate and scribbled, not unlike loosely tangled cord, and often appears to define the edges of odd, organic shapes or trace the erratic courses of rogue particles or projectiles. Others suggest plant tendrils or stems. These float on top of or emerge from milky, translucent veils or atmospheres of color whose appearance (think of Turner's or Monet's foggy or hazy landscapes) provides a perfect counterpoint to the lines. The overall effect of Boston's works is pleasing without being superficial. Her subtlest paintings are Zen-like and meditative. Boston sometimes collaborates artistically with her husband, B.H. Boston, an acclaimed poet. A Visual Arts Program exhibition showcasing these collaborations is being planned.

Stuart Burton, a gifted painter, art teacher, and long-time San Diego resident, currently runs a small art school (the Art Academy of San Diego) whose faculty includes four of the painters in this exhibition: Burton, Robert Treat, Constance Athens, and Stephen Curry. Burton is best-known as a landscape artist, but is an excellent figurative painter, as well. An exciting series of paintings by Burton depicting running dogs will be the subject of a future Visual Arts Program exhibition. Burton's most recent painting (one of two works by him in this exhibition) is a powerful landscape diptych titled *La Familia*. Its subject is a pair of trees in Mexico where he lives and paints part of the year. *La Familia* admirably demonstrates the artist's skilled brushwork and sensitivity to form and color.

Stephen P. Curry is one of San Diego's highest-profile and most discussed mid-career artists. Although he is best known as a painter, he doesn't confine himself to one medium, discipline, or style. In the past, his works have ranged from realism to abstraction; and suspended cut-outs to paintings. Curry's "Constellation Series," to which the painting in this exhibition (*Constellation # 20*) belongs, ranks among the artist's most successful bodies of work. Like other paintings in this series, the imagery of *Constellation #20* is ingeniously derived from the random bits of sky that can be seen through a dense canopy of tree foliage. Seen from a distance, however, the painting whose image was inspired by an artist's observation of the random and earthbound coalesces into the celestial and poetic: a suggestion of constellation-like clusters of stars. Of course, all of this taps into Chaos Theory, finding order in

disorder, patterns in randomness, etc., which are beyond the scope of this statement. But seeing negative space used in a manner this masterful and clever is thrilling. Also impressive is Curry's color sense, especially in the palette of blues and greens – enlivened with touches of ochres and reds – that he used to render the constellation. Superimposed on a vast, cream-colored field, the effect of the work, in total, is sublime. Coming back to the surface of the canvas, the way that Curry chose to render each fragment of the constellation with a technique that is clean and hard-edged on the outside, yet painterly on the inside, is another wonderful touch. The temptation might have been to give the constellation image a pristine, airbrushed look to harmonize with the immaculate, eggshell-smooth background, but the presence of slight texture from paint on a brush wielded by an artist's hand imparts a delightful degree of warmth and adds a hint of textural contrast. From edge to edge, *Constellation #20* is as fresh as a contemporary painting can be.

Like Kathleen Marshall (discussed below), **Marianela de la Hoz** combines astonishing technical ability with a preference for working on a small scale. Her intensive studio training is reflected in the fact that she also makes her own paint. Born and educated in Mexico and currently living in San Diego, de la Hoz's egg tempera paintings grapple with profound and often disturbing intellectual, psychological, and cultural issues. A recurring theme in her art is the subjugation of women in Mexican society. In the tradition of Posada and the great Mexican artists who preceded her, many of de la Hoz's paintings incorporate nightmarish iconography from Mexican folk art and other sources. Skeletons, nasty insects, mutilation, and hybrid man/animal creatures abound. These works are shockingly grotesque and surreal, but ultimately fascinating and purposeful. De la Hoz renders detail with microscopic precision; an approach that is no more apparent than in *Contemporary Artists Reunion*, one of two paintings by de la Hoz in this exhibition. In this group portrait of four partying artist-comrades sitting together on a sofa, the third figure from the left is the conceptual artist of the group. Because language and text are important tools of conceptualists, de la Hoz appropriately covers his garments with words. However, they are so small that at first glance, they appear to be nothing more than tiny creases or random marks. With the assistance of a powerful magnifying glass, the words and phrases can be discerned: "sangre" (blood); "la pintura esta muerta" (painting is dead); "tirar lo viejo forma" (throw out the old techniques), etc. The last phrase refers to de la Hoz's lamenting the lack of fundamental technical skills (especially drawing and painting) being taught to students in many of the big art schools of today. "They can paint in blood or urine, but don't know how to use oil paints," she says. This point is further driven home by two of the other artists portrayed in this painting. One has a large head and small hands; the other large hands and a small head. The figure with the large head and small hands has big ideas and over-thinks things, but has no way of executing them. The opposite is true for the other figure. "One needs a balance between concept and technique," de la Hoz advises.

For those familiar with her art, **Jeanne Dunn** is in a class by herself in terms of "painterly" application of paint. She has worked and studied extensively in Europe. Whether tackling a still life, landscape, or the human figure, Dunn is phenomenal at her craft. *French Trenches #3*, the largest painting in "Pure Painting 3," is an ominous, dramatic landscape vaguely reminiscent of a theatrical backdrop that could

have been inspired by Charles Burchfield. Looking at the painting from a subversive perspective, the person who emerges out of the mist walking a dog in the upper right center of the painting could be headed for danger, being stalked by a predator peering through the dark foliage in the foreground. Or perhaps the walker is the stalker.

Wayne Hulgin is one of the city's most versatile and skilled artists and teachers. Interested in all aspects of art and artmaking, and an avowed perfectionist, Hulgin's works have ranged from beautifully rendered, realistic drawings to thought-provoking, conceptually driven and process-oriented pieces that test the limits of obsession. In his untitled triptych on view in "Pure Painting 3," the central panel – encrusted edge-to-edge with a sensuous riot of large globs of oil paint – is flanked by a pair of smooth, solid-colored, enameled panels of the same size. The contrasts and relationships between the surfaces and colors are glorious in a formal sense, while at the same time offering a witty approach to contemporary art. The "sister" painting to Hulgin's piece in this exhibition is not on display, but offers some insight into the artist's conceptual mindset. This painting follows the same size and format as the one on view: a central, heavily impastoed panel flanked by two minimalist ones. However, the paint on the central panel was gathered week after week, a few scrapings at a time, from the dollops of oil paint remaining on his students' palettes. Hulgin's desire to incorporate his students' artmaking materials into a work of his own, combined with the combined random nature of the colors of the collected paint, not only attest to the teacher's bond with his students, but also his ingenuity in making art from materials that were destined for the trash.

Beth King, now in her late seventies, is a world traveler and the senior member of the "Pure Painting 3" artists. Although she has long been acknowledged by a devoted group of artists and collectors as a "painter's painter," until recently her work was only infrequently shown in public venues. In late 2009, the Visual Art Program hosted an impressive solo exhibition of King's recent paintings at the Pacific Beach/Taylor Library gallery, introducing her to a new and overwhelmingly appreciative audience. Although affinities between King's paintings and those of Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove, Arshile Gorky, and Adolph Gottlieb are strong, her inspiration is largely derived from her observations and experiences as a world traveler. Over the years, she has recorded them in dozens of sketchpads and notebooks. Whether these quick and rudimentary notations eventually become large canvases or intimately scaled works on paper, they are all distinguished by handsome design, unusual and effective color schemes, and graphic power. In general, King avoids representational imagery, classifying her works as non-objective abstractions. She prefers to work within a square format, and with little preplanning. A work evolves as she paints, and she may rework a canvas years later. King's paintings are highly personal, unusual, engaging, and, as a testament to her skill, evoke an immediate and visceral response in the viewer.

Kathleen E. Marshall, who was born and raised in La Jolla, holds several degrees in studio art and art history. She divides her time between La Jolla and Paris, where she is currently building a new studio. Revered in art circles here and abroad, Marshall is best known for her small, intricately rendered gouache paintings depicting period rooms whose French doors open onto courtyard gardens. Marshall's

works rarely exceed 18 by 12 inches, and most are considerably smaller. Although the artist is exceptionally skilled at rendering the human figure, her rooms are strangely devoid of people, their personal effects, and most other evidence of regular habitation. The solitude and stillness of these interiors is almost palpable. In many works, a warm afternoon light bathing a darkening interior adds further mystery and enchantment; an effect heightened by the velvety texture of the gouache. Shadows and reflections can be key elements, as well. Marshall is influenced by Vuillard, Balthus, Vermeer, and Hopper. Her still lifes, often depicting fruits and vegetables (turnips, figs, shallots, onions, etc.) that are commonly ignored by artists, are unusual and noteworthy.

Having recently received her MFA in painting from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) – in itself a rare occurrence given the school’s orientation towards conceptual works and new media – **Jesse Mockrin** is the youngest artist in this exhibition. Her primary interest is the human figure. Many of Mockrin’s recent paintings appear to have been inspired by baroque religious paintings, especially those of Rubens, and are delightfully grandiose and theatrical. Mockrin’s twist is that the groups of young nude males she depicts are obviously gay and placed in surreal, homoerotic situations...lounging among the clouds, cavorting in dramatic landscapes, etc. By comparison, the two stunning, life-size portraits showcased in “Pure Painting 3” (from her “young professional” series) are remarkably restrained. However, in their subtly confrontational poses they reveal more about their subjects than a photograph ever could.

At the height of a distinguished career in the Hollywood animation industry, **Robert Treat** abruptly renounced all aspects of the entertainment world to pursue his first love, fine art. His earth-toned encaustic (pigmented bees wax) paintings, which avoid obvious references to figuration, realism, or narrative content, are understated, elegant, and ambitious. Experimentation with materials is a hallmark of Treat’s oeuvre, and major influences range from primitive art to Willem de Kooning and Brice Marden. Treat is best known for large-scale works (these can be single panels, diptychs, or triptychs) with one image spanning all of the components. However, his works on paper, which combine delicate layers of encaustic augmented by drawing media and demonstrate a marvelous sensitivity to materials, are no less rewarding. The paintings in “Pure Painting 3,” from Treat’s “Containment Series,” are among his most recent. These abstractions suggest cross sections of vessel forms: a “void” defined or contained by loosely arranged architectonic shapes. The forms in these works are evocative of those by the late, great artist Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Treat is also an accomplished architectural designer, photographer and printmaker. NOTE: Encaustic painting is not well-known or understood, even among artists. Danielle Rice’s comprehensive article on the subject can be found in *The Dictionary of Art* (Jane Turner, editor), Grove, 1996, v. 10, pp. 196-200. This 34-volume set is available at several San Diego Public Library locations.

The imagery found in **Jen Trute’s** surreal paintings is so complex that it may take several viewings to absorb it all. Without a doubt, and at the risk of sounding sexist, Trute is San Diego’s Queen of Surrealism, perhaps assuming the mantle from the late, great painter Ethel Greene. Whereas the imagery of many of today’s surrealists is more often than not hackneyed, derivative, and gratuitously macabre, at

her best Trute is ambitious, imaginative, and timely. Her polished technique is nothing short of astonishing. The two Trute works in “Pure Painting 3,” which confront issues ranging from environmental pollution to the role and perception of women in our culture, rank among her best, ever. The figure depicted in Trute’s monochromatic painting *Coral* is Ann Forderer Berchtold, a well-known San Diego-area art organizer and renowned beauty. *Coral* brings new meaning to the term “environmental portraiture,” portraying a serene-looking Berchtold sitting calmly – perhaps having afternoon tea – in a dying underwater environment. Berchtold is surrounded by dead, bleached-out coral and other sea life threatened by acidification of the oceans, lower oxygen levels, and other man-made conditions. Like the dead coral, Berchtold is shown as a pale, ghost-like entity resembling a white porcelain doll. A poisonous fish swims perilously close to her head.

All for Baby, Trute’s other painting in the exhibition, is as colorful and dramatic as *Coral* is understated and subdued. According to the artist, *All for Baby* “is about a future in which even the ruling class cannot isolate itself from the effects of environmental destruction.” In this world – overseen by UNIVIEW (an all-powerful governmental or corporate entity similar to Big Brother) – a Barbie doll-like mother tends to her cherubic baby daughter who also resembles a doll...albeit one sprouting horns. The nursery, enclosed in a transparent dome, overlooks a hellish cityscape smothering under clouds of yellow-green gases. Other appropriately horrific symbols and mutations abound in this work, but it is well-thought-out and wonderfully executed.

Laboriously executed using a glazing technique that involves applying hundreds of microscopically thin, translucent layers of oil paint to gessoed birch panels, **Vicki Walsh’s** portraits horrify their subjects and delight their viewers. Like many artists, she finds classic beauty boring, and prefers to focus on flaws and imperfection. Scars, blemishes, errant hairs, wrinkles, asymmetric features, missing teeth, and shaved heads are Walsh’s passion. With this approach comes a philosophy that decries our culture’s obsession with youth, beauty, and superficiality. As her paintings have evolved, Walsh’s imagery has become progressively more grotesque and complex, though still focusing on frontal views of faces. For consistency in a series, she prefers to work simultaneously on numerous portraits at the same time, a process that can extend over months or years. Walsh is one of only four painters whose works were included in “Here Not There,” the survey exhibition of cutting-edge contemporary art created by San Diego-area artists and currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.