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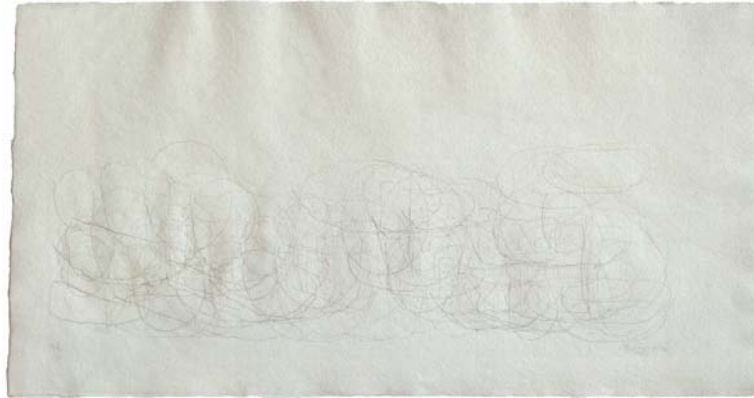
*Winter Salon*, Björn Ressle Gallery, 16 E. 79th Street, through January 31<sup>st</sup> 2009

Björn Ressle's *Winter Salon* in his modest one-room gallery on the second floor of 16 East 79th Street, while nominally a show of works on paper, is actually a hot spot for some of the most significant Conceptual Artists of our time, including some of the most famous pioneers of the movement, in addition to a number of fine works of the what-you-see-is-what-you-get school, otherwise known as Modernism. The show features 46 artists, most of them still living, and most of *them* were crammed bodily into his 27x16-foot gallery space (with a 13-foot ceiling) for the six+ hour opening, December 13.

To address the pioneers first, the pieces by **Joseph Beuys** (1921-1986) , **John Cage** (1912–1992), and **Sol LeWitt** (1928–2007), **Robert Ryman** (b. 1930), and **William Anastasi** (b. 1933) attest to the pedigree of the overall collection. From **Beuys** we have three drawings from the series of 100 he compiled in 1974, calling them *Codices Madrid*, after the recently discovered compendium by the same name by Leonardo Da Vinci, whom he revered. The ensemble was meant to be a repository of quickly sketched ideas for possible future artworks, and they offer insights into Beuys' thinking. The ones here are hasty but detailed renderings of a flower in a circle with an enigmatic number 3; a nude woman from the haunches up seeming to contemplate either a brassiere or small figure holding a set of scales (of justice?); and three superposed skeletons in apparently burial positions, as in an archaeological find. Beuys went over his lines several times, so it's not always easy to discern his intention. But once you sort things out, it becomes clear that he had very particular ideas in mind.

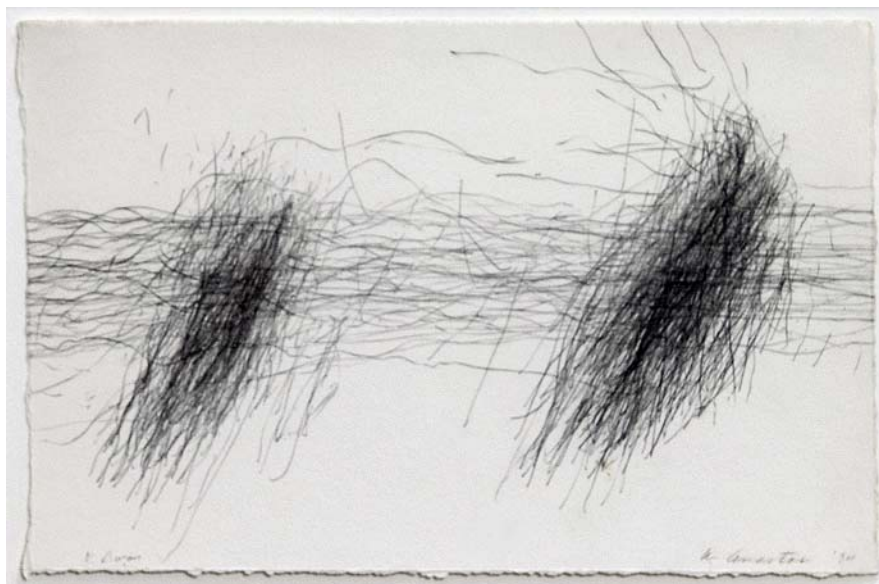
**Sol LeWitt's** contribution is one tempera painting of an orange and yellow isometric cube in the lower left of a dark blue background. It is a fine example of the very self-effacing and ironic artist's career-long obsession with impersonal geometric objects. He came along at the right time, the beginning of the conceptual art movement in the 60s, and his work caught on, leading the way. The momentum of this celebrity lasted him all his life (and he was modest and generous about it, to his credit). The idea behind this kind of Conceptual art involves a refutation of the Modernist tradition, that it reproaches for being too Euro-centric (and therefore complicitous with colonialism), too solipsistic, too convinced that its standards were universals. So content is kept to a minimum, radically simplified, with all possible cultural references removed, the bonds to tradition broken. The problem is that a generation or so later, the urgency for the original opposition has vanished; the very tradition it opposed has become that much more a historical curiosity; the concept that underlies it seems ever more strained, and we are left with an intrinsically (typo)unchallenging, visually flat image. The little cube in saturated colors, instead of spitting in the eye of five centuries of European and American art, looks like a forlorn orphan from Fischer-Price.

**Cage's** two work in the show are consistent with his musical (or anti-musical) output, that included chance-based music One of them, *Abstract 10R/6* consists of outlines of rocks carefully selected before being placed on the paper, *I Ching* style (one of his lifelong interests), making it a study in aleatory juxtaposition. The result is a series of traces of chance associations of masses, a celebration of contingency, the world-as-we-find-it-to-be, so dear to conceptual artists, whose work aims to serve as a continual antidote to notions of the-world-as-we-imagine-it-to-be (up with induction; down with deduction!) There's an implicit didacticism here, which perhaps occupies the space vacated by the aesthetic, since beauty (nor feeling) is not part of this discussion.



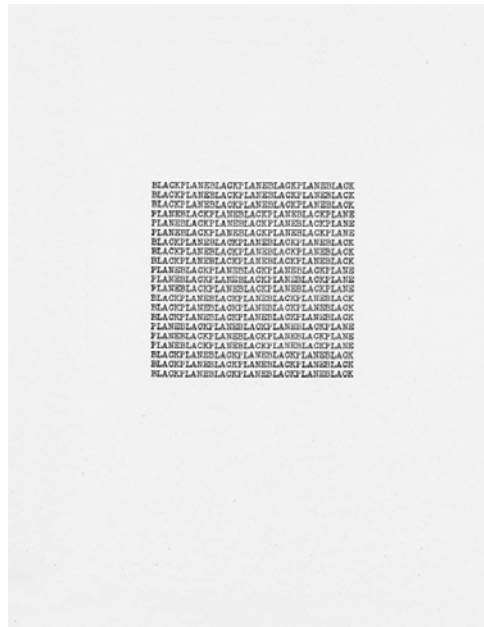
The contribution of renowned artist **William Anastasi** (b. 1933) goes even farther in this direction. His *Subway Drawing* (2006) consists of the tracings of two pencils, one in each hand, of the movement of a subway he was riding on. What we see is two skeins of scribbles, such as a middle schooler might do as a grade-C science project. On one level this is an invitation to be observant of the meaning of traces of absent things—one thinks of aggregations of overlapping bird tracks on a beach, or shiny slug-trails on a concrete sidewalk, or the sweeping traces of bent wind-blown branches touching the surface of snow. But these tracings would each have an aesthetic component, while Anastasi seems to have deliberately excluded even the narrowest peek at the aesthetic in a work of absolute literality, of zero-degree prosaism. And whether Anastasi found the discarded science project in a dumpster or did it himself is, of course, irrelevant; it works in the same way, once it is framed on the wall, to deny the viewer any possible aesthetic lift, thus revealing our urge for and expectation of that lift, and all our attendant assumptions of what art should do. So its effect is ascetic rather than aesthetic—or even anesthetic. It doesn't dull; if we allow it to work, it purifies, though we may have to pass through a stage of frustration first. This is completely within the Duchampian tradition, that started with his defiant Readymades (1913), but Anastasi is even more austere, since he abjures even Duchamp's wit.

Coming up from Anastasi's degree-zero Conceptual Art are a number of pieces that offer a bit more Concept to chew on, and even be amused by, and even more aesthetic visual content.



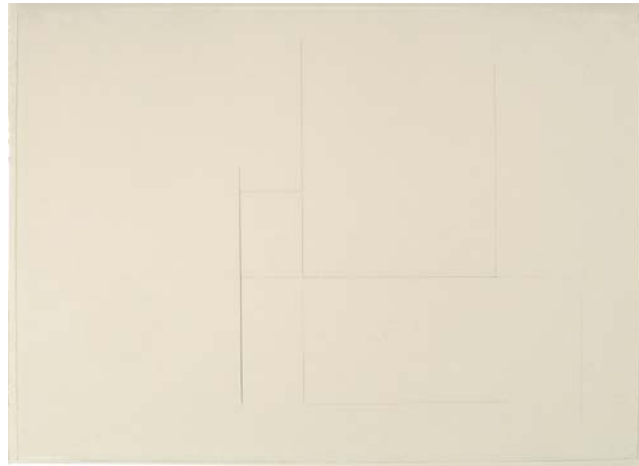
**Robert Ryman**, one of the pioneers of Minimalism has lent the show a piece from his private collection. Ryman has work in the permanent collections of many of the best museums of the world. A comparison to the Anastasi piece, however, shows how far Conceptual Art has come in purifying itself of any trace of aesthetic elements. Ryman wished to avoid all referentiality. His paintings were about the paint they were painted with, which makes them a kind of abstract sculpture. Much of his work consists only of white rectangles—but they have a definite shape, many have activity around the edges (frames), and in some the paint has darkened with age in certain places. Ryman's piece in this show is one of his more active. He uses primarily white paint, which does not completely cover the paper, and includes a black mostly obscured rectangle (and one other blotch) as well as his name in pale green and the year 58 and some additional doodles in yellow (crayon?). Compared to Anastasi, it's virtually a landscape!—certainly closer to Abstract Expressionism, full of gestures. When it was painted, a much more assertive Abstract Expressionism was all the rage, and Minimalism and Conceptualism were the new defiant kids on the block. Today, although the piece remains clearly minimalist, it seems positively loaded with just the kinds of aesthetic cues that Anastasi and the pure Conceptualists eschew .

Minimalist sculptor **Carl Andre** (b. 1935) contributes two pieces from his concrete poetry collection, *BLACKPLANEBLACKPLANEBLACKPLANEBLACK*, 1964 and *VISA*, 1960. One feels almost nostalgic seeing these works that are visual art created with that most constraining and challenging of media, now archaic, the typewriter. Its very limitations add fascination, however. The works, when skillfully done combine graphic form with verbal signification, and these may either complement or conflict. *BLACKPLANE* etc. can only make the viewer smile as if the typewriter were doing its best to create a black plane, since the words from a space-free rectangle on the page, but the closest it can come is naming one over and over.



**Janet Passehl**, who has shown in New England, France and Iceland as well as New York, invites her viewers to become aware of the subtleties in the substrates of her work, cloth or paper. The tension in her work balances on the liminal edge between nothing and something. By fine-tuning one's perception down to the level of her delicate something, one begins to see much more. Here she contributes 20x13-inch sheets of off-white paper with three very faint lines penciled on each of them at right angles to each other. If you think there is nothing or little there, you need to adjust expectations, turn down the mental chatter and see on a different level. It's a sensitizing process, contemplative, Zen.

Could you do it without her framework? Of course, but she offers the occasion, the setting, the calm, the encouragement, and the assurance that you will see more than you expect.



Compared to Passehl, Melissa **Kretschmer's** (still minimalist) pieces are positively dramatic. Always working with geometric regularity, these works on paper feature pale yellow beeswax in broad strokes over layered paper, then she melds the wax with graphite, producing broad brushstroke patterns of beeswax interlaced with graphite, with occasional dark rectangles of graphite. The perceptual byplay here is between flat and layered; black, pale yellow and their melding, and figure/ground, since the broad brushstrokes are as wide as the background spaces. If we've learned to look closely and appreciate minimal difference, there is much pleasure in her layering, her thin lines of bushed graphite, the irregular overlap of rectilinearity, and her disciplined black and pale yellow palette.



Norwegian photographic artist **Anne Senstad** creates smooth color fields in which dark yellow gradually becomes orange, or forest green sweeps subtly into kelly-green, a not unpleasant experience. The exceptional thing that she has captured is the absence of boundary, the infinite gradualness of her subtle color transitions. Her "something," the color, is unmistakable; but her "nothing" at a second structural level, is the process of change in her something. You know it's there by looking at the two extremes; you just can't tell just where it takes place, and this is quite engaging. Moving up on a continuum of content.

**George Quasha's** "axial drawings" are engaging abstractions offering a piquant sense of dancing torque produced by dragging and twisting the side of graphite stick. Quasha has made an investigation of the exceptional phenomenon of axially balanced rocks, improbable accommodations with gravity, where highly asymmetrical rocks are carefully and bizarrely balanced upon each other. It's an example, like Cage's, of finding spiritual forces in rocks, but Quasha uses those forces to create astonishing rock combinations/compositions, which he exhibits (elsewhere) as sculptures. His drawings represent some of these.

**Mary Hrbacek's** two charcoal drawings of tree silhouettes are part of her series of anthropomorphic shapes in trees. She first photographs them, then renders in charcoal, that most primitive of media. Her graphic black-on-white silhouettes pit the sinuous sensuality of the tree outlines against the austerity of the hyper-contrasty technique, as if to warn us against overindulging a pathetic fallacy. The graphic reduction leaves the figures doubly ambiguous, and this is her achievement: are they transcriptions of trees that represent human forms? representations of trees in charcoal? abstract charcoal markings vaguely evocative of trees? She carries off a very delicately balanced form of referential minimalism.

In contrast, Swedish artist **Ragna Berlin's** realistic drawings of hypothetical ovoid solid objects seduce the viewer with their squeeze-ball softness as they nestle against each other. If not for their yielding surfaces and mysterious inner glow, they might be mistaken for idealized potatoes, a comfort-food connection that underscores the warmth of physical companionship they convey, one might say, in the abstract, no mean accomplishment.

Now adding poignancy to pure feeling, are the works by Korean born artist **Songyi Kim** and photographer **David Higginbotham**. Kim contributes three sketches of herself, each one obscured by the tan stains of scattered spent tea leaves. It's a strange screen to see a portrait through, but it works. The surface pattern of little tan twists lends mystery to the obscured head in the background that surprises on first glance, then slightly dissipates upon closer inspection, leaving the viewer to marvel at the simplicity of the device and perhaps to wonder why the face, the artist's, is hiding.

**David Higginbotham's** sepia-toned photographs from the 1990s could easily be mistaken for images from the 1930s: *Stocking Shoes in a Dish* (1997) shows a pair of attractive legs viewed from the rear standing in a bowl, in stockings with classic seams. The food association makes the fetish content humorously explicit, a subtle reminder that the work is recent, since surrealist photographers took themselves far more seriously. He continues on this theme in an earlier photograph, *Shoes on a Plate* (1993) by placing a pair of high-heeled strap shoes on a plate, with a knife and fork. The present order would suggest another course of the meal, or the leftover "bones" after feasting on the legs from the first image? Then in a final image (*Bathroom*, 1996) we see (the same?) stockings, leotard and girdle hung out to dry on a shower curtain rod over a nondescript archaic bathtub. The years of creation suggest that Higginbotham explored these themes over time; the present order indicated that he may finally have reached a satisfying insight into his deeper motivations for this long-term interest.

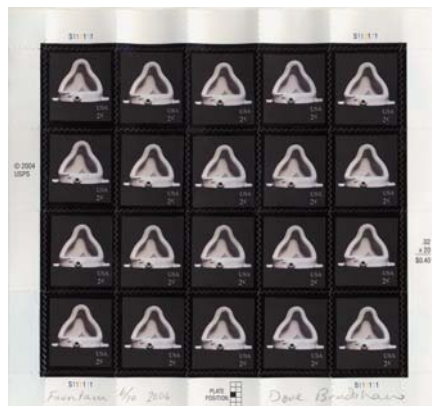
**Mark DeMuro's** impassioned enhancements of newspaper photos continue in this line. DeMuro finds photographs in newspapers of political figures he feels strongly about and transforms them into his own political cartoons, complete with balloon statements, using graphite, ink, crayon, oil and pastels. Then he laminates the newspaper, which transforms it into a preserved historical document, the substrate of his statement. His transformations are intended to reveal the true intentions of Bush, Cheney and company, and they are not flattering. Cruder in message than your average political cartoon (Bush utters an inarticulate sound), their charm derives from the authenticity of their photojournalistic origins. It used to be presumed that worthwhile art had depth and multiple meanings.

Conceptual art has altered this assumption, frequently reducing the depth in the work, and deliberately eschewing deep meaning as tainted by cultural history. But some Conceptual art embraces depth and works on a number of levels—including the visual! **Dove Bradshaw's** work does it for this show. Her two miniature pieces in her series *Contingency Jets*, made of silver, liver of sulfur, and beeswax applied to paper, are both compelling abstracts, rich in detail. But **Bradshaw**, a major innovator herself in artistic techniques for the past 35 years, is not content merely to present intriguing forms that repay even microscopic examination. No; we are also witnessing a chemical reaction *in flagrante*, a progressive devouring of the silver by the sulphur, leaving a residue of flakey white micro-

crystals that form into tiny knobs. The artwork is changing, albeit very slowly, before our eyes, altering its shape, its composition, its texture (does it have an expiration date?) So Bradshaw has framed a slow dynamism, which for now looks like the silhouette of a water bear (tardigrade). It's an intriguing *looking* piece, backed by an exciting concept.



**Bradshaw** has another set of works in the show which confirm her resolve to add layers of meaning to an already rich surface: two sheets of postage stamps of her own design, and NOT part of the Post Office's make-your-own-stamps program (photo.stamps.com). One of them, a two-center, depicts Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, the urinal he signed a fictitious name to and claimed as his own art in 1913. It is a howlingly unlikely subject for a US postage stamp, but there it is, tiny and deadpan, complete with all the proper marginal stamp sheet markings. The other stamp sheet features a photograph taken by Bradshaw of a woman on whose back is written the names of the elements that make up the human body, with the size of the letters reflecting their relative proportions: carbon, hydrogen, etc. But she has taken it a step farther in the mischievous spirit of Duchamp: she has used her stamps to mail real letters, a form of performance art that is as subtle as it is subversive, managing to fool the USPS, which has threatened her with fines and jail. And for \$300 she will send anyone a letter with one of her stamps. This is more personal than a dedication. Her envelope sent to herself with her own return address and a cancelled stamp is framed under glass on the wall. Considering the risk of prosecution she runs every time she mails one of these, it's a steal.



By JOEL SIMPSON  
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