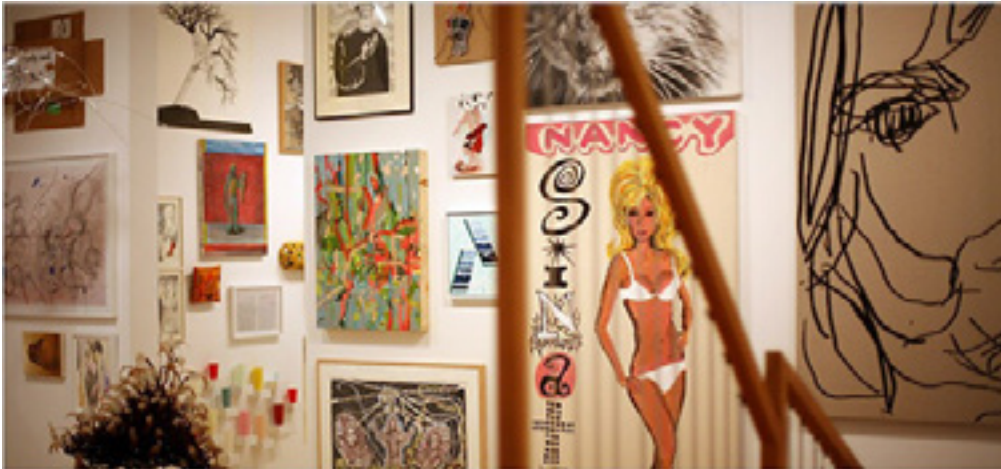


NEW YORK TIMES

AUGUST 9, 2007

GO AHEAD, EXPECT SURPRISES

by Holland Cotter



NeoIntegrity at Derek Eller Gallery, organized by Keith Mayerson, features works from about 190 artists.
Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Artists make great exhibition curators. They have expert eyes, a personal stake in the game and contacts with all kinds of other artists, including those who ride under the establishment radar. Museum surveys of contemporary art rarely produce surprises. Artist-organized gallery shows almost always do.

And “NeoIntegrity” at Derek Eller Gallery does. Put together — amassed is the word — by the painter Keith Mayerson, it’s striking for its size alone. With pieces by about 190 artists in a space the size of a modest one-bedroom apartment, it’s the biggest little show of the summer — one of the most eclectic and one of the best.

In planning it Mr. Mayerson ransacked his address book and memory bank. He called on friends, neighbors, lovers, ex-teachers, past and present students, close colleagues and others he knew only from afar. If a certain painting knocked him out on a routine studio visit a decade ago, chances are that it, or something like it, is here.

This archival approach encompasses well-known figures (Nayland Blake, Ross Bleckner, James Siena) and those fresh on the scene. Age is not a selection factor: Ed Clark and Jane Freilicher, with decades-long careers, rub shoulders with newbies. And although painting is dominant, there is a lot more to see. Scott Hug and Michael Magnan deliver a patriotic pizza box; Sam Gordon an episodic video; and Hiroshi Sunari a ginko sapling grown from seeds that survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

Variety is the bottom line, and one would expect no less from Mr. Mayerson, an artist of multifarious accomplishments. He made his New York debut in a 1994 group show with a virtuosic book-length sequence of cartoon drawings about Pinocchio. It was fantastic, and his fans were expecting more of the same in his solo debut at Jay Gorney three years later; instead they got woozy paintings of rainbows and gurus.

Then he was in and out of sight for several years, teaching at New York University. In 2003 Eller gave him a big-small solo — many paintings, tiny room — of brushy, jaundice-toned pictures loosely related to a “Hamlet” theme. Last season at Eller Mr. Mayerson did a portrait show of his heroes: Judy Garland, John Lennon, Audrey Hepburn, Jimi Hendrix, Bugs Bunny, Andy Warhol and Arthur Rimbaud. It was great. It had a kind of Rembrandt-Andy feel, soulful old master meets Pop queer. It was serious and funny at the same time.

The same can be said for “NeolIntegrity,” beginning with its title. Mr. Mayerson explains in a gallery news release that when he was given the go-ahead for the group show, he decided to take the opportunity to start an art movement. He even wrote a position paper for it, “The NeolIntegrity Manifesto.”

On the one hand the whole business is send-up, a joke. Movements are a thing of the past, when there was one kind of art and another kind, and that was it. Now there’s so much of so many things that nothing can or needs to be defined. Mr. Mayerson has always been very pro-muchness as an artist, thinker and curator. He embraces it, which is what makes his work feel generous, makes wherever he takes it feel right.

Some would say that integrity as a moral quality is also a thing of the past, with the art world swimming in money, pumping out product, ignoring conflicts of interest and so on. Mr. Mayerson’s response is not to scold but to ask, “What to do?” Hence the manifesto, an 11-point declaration that defines art as a humanist endeavor. But each definition comes with a modifying, even contradictory statement. Art should reflect the artist; art should reflect the culture. Art should not be a commodity; but if it is, that’s O.K.

In the end there’s something here for almost everyone to accept or reject. This is the muchness factor in operation again. One definition of integrity is, after all, wholeness, completeness, taking it all in. And taking it all in, artwise, is what Mr. Mayerson’s show is about.

You want still-life painting? Ingrid Arneberg and Ann Craven paint pretty flowers. Steve Balkin, Hugh Van Dusen and Neil MacDonald do landscapes. Portraiture accounts for a large slice of material. Although some sitters are not identified — Marvin Mattelson paints an “Eric,” Enoc Perez a “Carole,” Kelley Walker a gondolier — a tip toward celebrity faces is pronounced. In addition to Kathe Burkhart’s likeness of Elizabeth Taylor and Eric Doeringer’s of Elizabeth Peyton, you’ll find Kembra Pfahler captured by Travis Hutchins; Jane Fonda by Carol Bove; and a sensational full-length Nancy Sinatra by Stephen Tashjian, the artist known as Tabboo!

A few portraits are more naughty than nice. Neither the self-pleasuring “Christian” in a Billy Sullivan painting nor the snout-nosed sitter in Matt Borruso’s “Magenta” is destined for the National Portrait Gallery.

Design is art-world fashionable at present, and you’ll find examples here: a ceramic pot by Renee So, a fabric swatch collage by Chris Bogia (very nice), and three player pianos grafted together, courtesy of Dan Knapp. But perhaps the most intriguing category is the one corresponding to the “sublime,” an aesthetic term that Mr. Mayerson uses with unqualified enthusiasm in his manifesto.

It’s hard to say exactly what he means by it. Exquisite workmanship? Andrew Ma-

drid's "American Flag," Jessie Mott's "Hamster" and Pam Lins's "Polar Bear Painting" all qualify, as does the contribution of several of the show's awesomely polished cartoonists, Nick Bertozzi, Brendan Burford and Matt Madden among them.

Then there are a few "spiritual" images, like an exquisite colored pencil drawing by Lorenzo De Los Angeles that gives a plate of spaghetti and meatballs a Last Supper glow, though we move into iffy, jokey territory here.

We seem to be light years away from sublime in Anne Collier's "Real Life Experiences of Big Breasted Women" and Keith Boadwee's exhibitionistic "Breakfast in America." But are we? We're certainly far from museum-land, as Ms. Collier's indelicate photo-appropriation is unlikely ever to see the inside of MoMA, and even the liberal Whitney would balk at the Boadwee. Still, if their work is unacceptable to institutional taste, unacceptable defines an above-it-all sublime of its own.

Mr. Mayerson obviously understands this and with relish integrates the unacceptable into his new art movement. His exhibition concept is less a concept than a happenstance placing of this object next to that one, and these across from those. His main concern, you sense, was that there be room enough for everything, the "everything" brought together by his eye, his passion and his memory. This is a group show version of the all that is his art.

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THE Arts

THURSDAY, AUGUST 9, 2007

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From First Arts Page

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"NeoIntegrity" continues through Aug. 24 at Derek Eller Gallery, 615 West 27th Street, Chelsea; (212) 206-6411

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