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Reviews

"A.B. Normal"
Wexham, through Sept 10
(see elsewhere)

top of the composition to anchor the bulbous flowers and their watery reflections, the painting would not be nearly as successful. Such strokes are the lingua franca of Snyder's work; a wide horizontal stripe or quick dash made with a paint-saturated brush, this expressive gesture, like Barnett Newman's slip or Pollock's drip, has become Snyder's signature.

Several wonderful early examples of Snyder's "stroke" paintings are on view, the most striking of which is the aptly titled *Lower and Strokes* (1968). Nine horizontal bands of warm hue—including rose, blood-red, peach and brown—are rendered in various widths and lengths over a pencil-drawn grid (reminiscent of children's writing tablets), harnessed with life. Snyder expertly stabilizes her composition with two raised sharp stripes that ground the image at the top and bottom, allowing the more ethereal elements in between to float, bleed or simply peter out. Later works strike a similar balance between pattern and chance, whether through the repetition of thickly layered green strokes in the monumental *Acropolis* with *Muse* (1984) or the tiered flower stalks in *Should You Wonder* (2002). All realize Snyder's desire to simultaneously engage and disrupt the grid as a structural element, something that plays out well as a metaphor for the coexistence of order and disorder in nature, another of the artist's favored themes.

A catalog essay by art historian Hayden Herrera highlights the political and personal underpinnings of Snyder's practice—her Jewish heritage, her feminist and spiritual concerns, and her commitment to family—as do the wall texts throughout the show. As a cultural institution, the Jewish Museum is understandably expected to underscore certain aspects of an artist's career, and perhaps Snyder would have it no other way. Nonetheless, of the 30 paintings included in this modest survey, several detract from her obvious gifts as an abstract painter: the crafty, faux-naïf works from the mid 1970s gathered in the second gallery, for instance, or some of the busy figurative collages of the mid-1990s, all of which combine a clutter of materials and images that compete rather than cohere. It's a small price to pay for an otherwise intelligently organized and well-deserved retrospective, one with the power to reveal the true scope of Snyder's influence. ■

The setting is perfect for a show about the abnormal: a white cube gallery that can be reached only by wading through the dim, chandeliered corridors of the National Arts Club. The hallways' decor may look straight out of a book by Henry James, but the show honors its title, "A.B. Normal," from the Mel Brooks film *Young Frankenstein* and features work of the weird and wacky variety, rather than the seriously gothic or disturbing.

Tim Hawkinson is front and center with two works: a crumpled pile of laundry mounted on wheels that trails behind viewers through the use of motion detectors, and a lovable sculpture (made to be sure for some of a giant nose, made from a flesh-colored blanket and



old leather shoes with the shoelaces dangling like mouse hairs. Bob Gramena's install on *Love Anesthesia* shows closed in the Frankenstein theme, with an ad hoc operating room complete with

an IV drip and oxygen tanks looked up to the wall. Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg, an artist team whose muse is hockey, have painstakingly recreated a Zamboni out of polystyrene, while John Bock's sculpture involves a pair of pants filled with popcorn. The most overrepresented artist of the season, Rickie Titus, exhibits an ensemble of chrome pots that refer to his earlier cooking works, but look out of place here.

Overall, the show's lighthearted approach to its subject is perfectly matched to its context. In the contemporary art world, normality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. —Marika Schwaninger



Tony Oursler
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
through Sept 18 (see elsewhere)

In 2001 the Musée d'Orsay in Paris invited Tony Oursler to make a video installation in response to a work of his choice from its collection. At the suggestion of his wife, the painter Jacqueline Humphries, Oursler selected Gustave Courbet's massive canvas *The Artist's Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven-Year Phase*

in *My Artistic and Moral Life* (1855), a self-portrait of the artist at work surrounded by a crowd that includes a nude model (though the painting in progress is a landscape), friends such as Baudelaire, and figures symbolizing religious and political personalities of the day.

Oursler's version, *Studio: Seven Months of My Artistic Education (Plus Some)*, is a collection of works borrowed from his family, friends

and collaborators and installed on a low wooden stage, a carefully orchestrated tableau that reflects the elements in Courbet's masterpiece. A light box streaked with fluorescent paint by Humphries stands in for the figure of Courbet's muse. A painting on Plexiglas by Joshua Thorson connecting the burial sites of three well-known megachurches of alternative religion—L. Ron Hubbard, Jack Parsons and Anton LaVey—evokes the window on the right side of Courbet's studio. Oursler himself is rendered not as a handsome maestro but as an overgrown asshead like blob covered in a video projection of multiple blinking eyes.

The centerpiece is *Shatekolders* (2000), a series of projected video portraits of dozens of Oursler's close associates—from Kim Gordon and Robert Altman to the artist's dealer Janella Reiring. It functions as a sentimental comment about the way an artist's practice—and perhaps even his success—is indebted to the company he keeps. —Larissa Gusak

Bill Owens, "America"
James Cohan Gallery, through Sept 24 (see elsewhere)

Now that most of America has been suburbanized—Whole Foods on Houston Street!—Bill Owens's amazing photographs of Ozzie and Harriet-ville seem even more contemporary than when he took them in the 1970s. This show highlights work reproduced in Owens's books *Suburbia*, *Leisure* and *Our Kind of People*, spanning the years 1969 to 1981. But the passage of time barely registers in this American dramatic, perennially populated by cross consumers wielding barbecue skewers, hedge clippers and an arsenal of toy guns.

Owens does more than just use the suburban landscape as a backdrop. His lens conveys his subjects—creating a much more and a station wagon looks like a criminal offense. A pot-

bellied husband and wife at a cookout appear ready for their imag shots. One of his most famous portraits transmits an angry-looking, rifle-toting kid with a mean crew out into a fog-ding wilder.

The surprise of the show is Owens's crowd scenes. In his most violent image, taken at the 1968 concert at Altamont, a circle of Hell's Angels cheer in murderous collusion, while the audience watches in horror from the periphery. In another from 1971, a neighborhood barbecue held in the curve of a cul-de-sac reveals the artificial efficiency of suburbia, designed only by a couple of teenagers in the foreground, who look like they're conspiring to smoke off. Far more provocative than any staged photographs, Owens's best images do more than capture a moment of American

history past; they foreshadow a future of SUVs, McMansions and reality TV. —Barbara Pollack



Untitled, 1972

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