

# ARTFORUM

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## "Underdog," E. 7th St. Gallery:

It's not at all clear yet that the so-called East Village "movement" is in fact a movement at all. Is this spate of new galleries more than just more galleries? Aren't they just filled with more paintings? Don't many (if not all) of these paintings have recognizable counterparts or predecessors elsewhere? Yes, yes, yes. Much (though by no means all) East Village work does cohere in its small size, somewhat shabby presentation (in framing and so on), and loose working, but the question is whether these traits have anything to do with locale. The same shabbiness and looseness are found in the work of young artists from outside the East Village—for example, in the impressive and interesting work by Andrew Masullo and Robert Garratt exhibited concurrently with this show at the International With Monument Gallery next door to it. The unifying factor may be not locational but generational: we are for the most part dealing with artists born in the middle and late '50s.

Yet Rick Prol, the painter who curated "Underdogs," seemed to be posing a unity of a kind among East Village artists. His title was a two-edged political statement. On the one hand it referred to the art, which was supposed to deal with the theme that "the realities of contemporary urban life makes underdogs of us all" (according to Prol's exhibition flier). Most of the works, however, were simply characteristic examples by each of the artists involved. The title's more serious reference was to the artists themselves. Specifically, it was a riposte to the "Champions" show at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in Soho last season. Prol responded to the establishmentarian mythos evoked in that exhibition's title by adopting the mythic position of David against Goliath; this was, in other words, a very deliberate attempt to oppose the East Village "movement" to the Soho establishment.

The "Champions" show featured 11 male artists, including such briefly radical luminaries as Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, and Futura 2000, along with *art brut*ists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and James Brown. Prol countered with 13 men and 5 women, with the *art brut* theme definitely in the ascendancy over the graffiti approach. What was interesting was the absence of radicality in this work, which featured easel painting in somewhat extreme parodies of the currently fashionable representational modes. Those who have followed Lower East Side shows over the last two years will recognize the now familiar roster of names and styles, which have already solidified into a new, younger establishment in the emerging galleries. This show was as good a sampling of them as one has seen.

Prol's work has been shown at various East Village and Lower East Side galleries. Loosely worked, cartoonlike imagery, in either acrylic or pastel, portrays men in business suits and hats with knives stuck through their necks, standing in bathtubs or toilets, screaming. Sometimes, like Goya's Saturn, they hold small torn-apart human bodies in their hands; sometimes a speech balloon holds a message—"No good." "Fuck?" The violent approach to the figure reminds one of a range of Modernist and post-Modernist figuration, from Willem de Kooning's "Women" to Georg Baselitz's upside-down angst victims. This is the most violently apocalyptic of the work here, and also among the most fully realized.

Ellen Berkenblit's tiny Tarot-like paintings on paper are a very different characteristic emblem. Some (the "portrait" types shown at Brooklyn's Terminal Show earlier this season) confuse figure and ground in a kind of mute expressiveness, as of an image locked on the surface of a river. Others, like those here, feature floating symbols (a crown, a wreath, a banner) that speak poignantly of something dreamed or lost, again, as it were, locked into a reflection. These works are at once cartoonlike and iconic, and not in the sense of early Pop. It seems generational again that these artists, unlike those of Roy Lichtenstein's age group, have no problem relating to cartoonlike icons seriously, not ironically.

Other basic features of East Village art to be seen here included Keiko Bonk's girl-on-top erotic kitsch, Gregg Smith's pointillist portraits of Mao, Caren Scarpulla's clever neo-Pop, and more. The tiny gallery is of a type becoming characteristic of the area, storefronts in which paintings are sometimes hung three on top of each other. No doubt the new style of exhibition space and the fact that most of the works are small are related. Yet several of these artists are turning toward larger scale. It will be interesting to see the results. A final note: this is one of the few shows of paintings in recent years that did not (aside from its name) contain references to the nearly ubiquitous Neo-Expressionist Dog.

—THOMAS McEVILLEY