

ARTS & LETTERS

GALLERY-GOING

A Rare and Joyous Alchemy

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY

All high art originates in the play between organization and intuition. Fred Otnes brings to his collage paintings a classical refinement and control that makes poetry out of chance pictorial effects. He dips into early Cubist collage techniques, touches Florentine and Renaissance bases, and reverses Dadaist chaos into gorgeous homages to order. The mini-retrospective at Reece Galleries displays a rare and joyous alchemy

FRED OTNES: THREE DECADES

Reece Galleries

SELINA TRIEFF

George Billis Gallery

PETER HOFFER: COMMON GROUND

Kathryn Markel Fine Arts

Born in 1930, Mr. Otnes served his first apprenticeship working after school in the engraving department at a local Kansas newspaper. The experience led to his assignment, in 1947, to a Marine mapping unit that marked his sensibilities for life (an experience similar to Richard Diebenkorn's). He enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1949 but pro-

have a formula for critical neglect. This is a terrific chance to see what timeless magic Fred Otnes makes with calibrated randomness and deep responses to specific moments in art history.

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Selina Trieff uses color for the exhilaration of it, creating opulent friezes that whisper of mortality. A student at Hans Hofmann's school in the 1950s, Ms. Trieff has gone her own way, ignoring the realist path of most other figurative painters. Her life's work is a metaphorical, painterly cosmos that unsettles and delights at the same time.

The recent paintings on view at George Billis, accomplished with characteristic bravura despite the artist's increased frailty, are simpler in composition than earlier ones. Absent from current repertory are the jester, the skeletons, the hooded figures and their animal familiars — Ms. Trieff's whole sepulchral wonderland in which the skull of Yorick contemplated Hamlet throughout her long exhibition career.

Compositions keep to two figures or single heads, each one stamped with the artist's own features like identical funeral masks. Yet the tone is buoyant, more youthful than the brooding



ferred the hands-on challenges of commissioned illustration.

Mr. Otnes became a major influence among illustrators, moving the field away from traditional representational techniques. His elegant and suggestive solutions to design problems earned him more than 200 awards and prestigious commissions. At the top of his field by the 1980s, he decided it was time to devote himself exclusively to the personal compositions he had been creating for years.

With a cunning blend of impulse and rigor, he turns the anti-painting urge of collage against itself by producing images in which the collage elements flow seamlessly into painted ones. Surfaces are distressed until the stubbled texture of old walls emerges to absorb and mute collaged items. Images flood with unpremeditated accidents, unguarded but never unguided.

Snippets of typeface, incantatory photo transfers of calligraphy or mathematical symbols, musical notations, pieces of metal type, and dried leaves appear throughout. "The Jester" (1998) is a riot of fragmentary forms that coalesce into a fractured jester — a recurring homage to early Picasso — in his two-horned hat. "Night in the Garden" (1996) represents a Cornelian strain in his work that I particularly love, though Mr. Otnes appropriates Renaissance imagery for broodier purposes than Cornell's. Juxtapositions of darkling figures, foliage, and incunabula serve a midnight mood that hints at nightmares contained — for now — by symbols of order: the arches, corbels, and moldings of classical architecture.

Mr. Otnes's sensibility requires a limited, earthen palette. "Blue Figure" (2004), the single painting built on a clear primary color, is the only off note.

Mr. Otnes's decades of immersion in the commercial world have exacted a price. Despite the commercial background of many Pop artists of the 1960s, current art-world protocols fetishize the now-standard M.F.A. career track. Add to that a celebrity-consciousness that cares more about who makes things than about how they are made, and you

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effigies of her previous work.

"Red Bird on Her Shoulder" (2006), a *tableau vivant* with two figures against a brilliant saffron-colored ground, typifies Ms. Trieff's blend of the hieratic and the theatrical. Devoid of atmospheric perspective, two figures present themselves frontally, like tomb sculpture. A length of gold leaf, repeated down the torso of one figure, conjoins them. The red line of a slack rope curves behind them. A bird, part whimsy, part omen — Poe's raven in blood red — accents the pageant.

Ms. Trieff's troupe has shed its Goya-esque robes for acrobat's body stockings; her *danse macabre* has given way to a festive stage. Stylized palm leaves, floated behind figures, hint at the wings of Florentine angels. Here and there a halo appears. The entire vivacious ensemble, viewed against long acquaintance with her work, jolts recollection of one mordant Bob Dylan line: "Ah, but I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now."

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Peter Hoffer is a deft and appealing painter who uses landscape as an excuse for pure painting. The motifs of landscape — luminous skies set off by the outline of trees, the dramas of light and shade — provide structure for gestural play, fragile transparencies, and beautiful color effects.

Light is the keynote of his accomplishment. Mr. Hoffer enjoys a pitch-perfect tonal sense that evokes the atmosphere of real places even though he is inventing his own. He invests imaginary scenes with the air, dew, and texture of real ones. He does so with great economy and without sacrificing remembered responses to the natural world. Emphasis is on the



GEORGE BILLIS

Selina Trieff, 'Sunset Angels' (2006).

mood and sweep of his motif, not the incidentals of a locale.

Mr. Hoffer's color range is seductive, discreet, and blessed with complex, convincing greens. Spare, loose layers of pigment are washed onto ungressoed panel, allowing wood grain to suggest the variegated patterning of nature. The most compelling works are those that, like the lovely "Periphery" (2005) and "Emblem" (2006), use the accidents of painting to evoke a sense of place rather than announce the artist's presence. Finishing layers of clear resin lend optical depth to delicate paint surfaces.

Otnes until May 13 (24 W. 57th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, 212-333-5830). Prices: \$8,500-\$22,500. Trieff until May 6 (511 W. 25th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-645-2621). Prices: \$600-\$15,000. Hoffer until April 29 (529 W. 20th Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-366-5368). Prices: \$2,200-\$8,500.



REECE GALLERIES

Fred Otnes, 'Fuppofe' (2005).