

## Ross Neher and Jeff Way at Mitchell Algu

At first glance this exhibition of work by two very different kinds of painters—one a barbarian, the other an esthete—seemed to demonstrate no thesis except perhaps that opposites attract. Yet the pairing told a revealing and important story about the paths to abstraction in painting after the Pop revolution. Both Jeff Way and Ross Neher emerged in the early 1970s. This exhibition introduced each artist with an early painting or two, then jumped directly to recent work, leaving us to guess at what came between.

Where they both started was with the photograph, that leveling force which in the 1960s, via Rauschenberg, Close and Warhol, banished "expression" and other myths from art. Neither Way nor Neher feared this Reaper. Instead, they used photography to get beyond the gesture and at the same time to reclaim conventionalized experience for painting. Way's *Elvis (I Was the One)* from 1981 is a multicolored 8-foot-tall action figure on canvas, a hunk o' burnin' love whose awesome musical presence is fully recovered from Warhol's flat Pop iconography through lumpy congealing acrylic reds, whites and blacks, but using nary a traditional brushstroke.

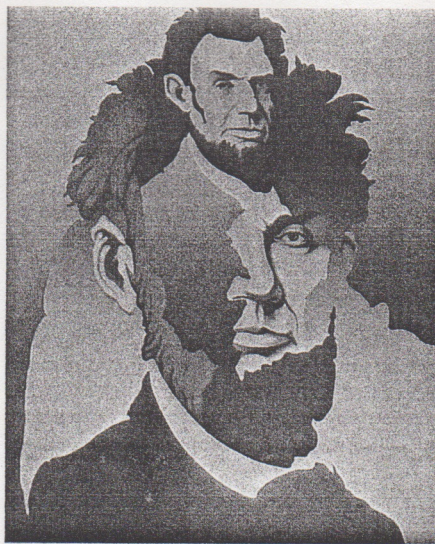
Neher took exactly the opposite tack, although he too banished the Ab-Ex gesture. His *Gray Ideal #12 (Double Portrait of Abraham Lincoln)*, done in 1970 while the artist was still a BFA student, embeds images of Lincoln within a smooth-

surfaced planar exercise in black, white and gray, the cool goof of a constructivist Ed Ruscha.

You could imagine lesser painters making entire careers out of these positions. But Neher and Way moved on. Three pictures by Way from the 1990s showed continents and oceans of congealing Pop colors—yellow, purple and pink—almost as if he'd melted his favorite toys on a cookie sheet. This was Art Brut with a vengeance, yet the titles, including *Surrealist Head with Man Ray's Chin* (1992), paid Dadaist homage to their buried photographic foundations. The three large oils by Neher were fields of carefully modulated color upon which appeared precise architectural forms. Two of the paintings were actually diptychs, abutting so tightly that they appeared to be a single surface scored by a palette knife.

In the mid-1970s, Way did wonderful experiments with puffs of dry pigment and chalk-line grids on canvas. After Elvis, his evolution is clear: He used a plasticized acrylic process to break down the patterns of the photo base, until the image, often a collage, began to disappear into abstraction. The paintings at Algu suggested a terminus ad quem. Where next?

Neher followed a more "painterly" path, leading in the 1980s and 1990s through worked atmospheres of color from which objects promised to emerge and sometimes did. His string through the labyrinth was not so much color itself as a way of dispersing it, layering and developing its subtleties across great space, like Turner. In the Algu pictures, however, the color was nuanced enough to stand for itself, as the foundation of a



Left, Ross Neher: *Gray Ideal #12 (Double Portrait of Abraham Lincoln)*, 1970, oil and acrylic on canvas, 80 by 64 inches. Right, Jeff Way: *Surrealist Head with Man Ray's Chin*, 1992, pigments and acrylic on canvas, 66 by 54 inches; at Mitchell Algu.



truly independent experience.

In the Age of Richter, with its elegies for authenticity, both these painters engage a task unique to them but more than personal, fighting through the mediation of mass culture to discover what it is that only painting can do.

—Lyle Rexer

## Arturo Herrera at Brent Sikkema

Caracas-born, New York-based artist Arturo Herrera, who multi-tasks in several mediums, including painting, drawing, photography and sculpture, concentrated on works on paper for his recent Chelsea exhibition. Recalling the magical proliferation of brooms in Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, what seemed to be an endless, spontaneously generated array of intimate, pocket-sized, rainbow-hued, mixed-medium and collage works—many inspired by Disney characters and illustrations—lined the long wall of the gallery. The *Fantasia* association was more explicit in Herrera's series of three imposingly scaled graphite drawings, an equally large study in red pencil and a grid installation of graphite drawings, all cryptically titled *Night Before Last* (2002). In each of these works, submerged in a flash-frozen tangle of lines and shapes, drips and smears, loops and barbs, the pail of soapy water and slippered feet of Mickey Mouse, as the eager, disastrously inquisitive sorcerer's apprentice, can (perhaps) be glimpsed.

This uncertainty about what we are seeing makes us slow down; it is part of Herrera's strategy and one of the sources of his arcane, protean charm. Formats and appropriated forms, fragments and styles change, merge and playfully metamorphose into carefully orchestrated hybrids, often with a hint of menace. Whether ironic or not, Herrera's rapid-fire inventiveness, seen here to best effect in the collage-and-gouache and collage-and-mixed-medium pieces, is purposefully artificial. These miniaturized, surrealized conundrums of Pop and Op, ab and rep, readymade and handmade, pack a subtle, subversive punch. Among other sleekly dissembled, cartoonish concoctions, there are a molten river and blazing forest cut by a scalloped line; a snowy, mountainous landscape with an eagle obscured by a brown, cross-hatched cloud; a Snow White cloaked in flesh-toned, pinky mauve and coral paint; a pelican blanketed by renderings of skeletons (did Herrera do this solely for the rhyme?); the scaly tail of a rat wrapped in red-figured silk grafted to an abstract flourish of color; a pert little scrap of red, yellow and blue, the puddled red perhaps the body of a bird of unknown species propped up on two delicately rendered talons, its tail a thin red line, cut out and dropped below the limits of the support. Herrera's portmanteau style and ludic impulse constitute a form of visual jabberwocky, in which the familiar is confidently manipulat-

Linn Meyers: *5,700*, 2002, ink on Mylar, 9½ inches square; at George Billis.

