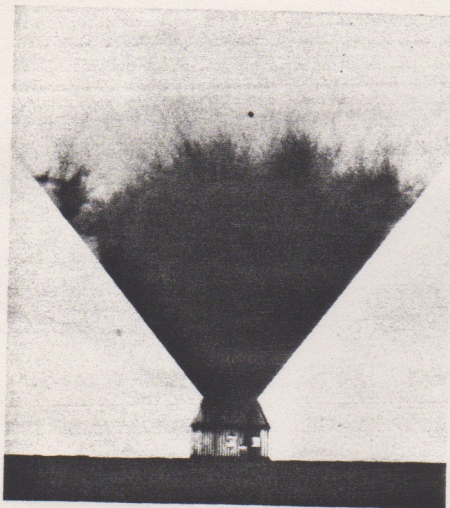


Naïf Nouveau that divides me. Is the intent of these images to undermine the act depicted? To undermine the act of depicting it? Or is simplicity of depiction its only intent? Irony, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. But I'm of two eyes on this. One is repelled by the anti-intellectual character of Naïf Nouveau. By emulating the naturalness of authentic primitives, Naïf Nouveau's pretend that ignorance is bliss and suggest they know better. It's their way of being intellectual about anti-intellectualism. The other eye is attracted to Naïf Nouveau's fascination with cliché and the banal. Sometimes its downright analytical about the obvious in the same way Pop Art was.



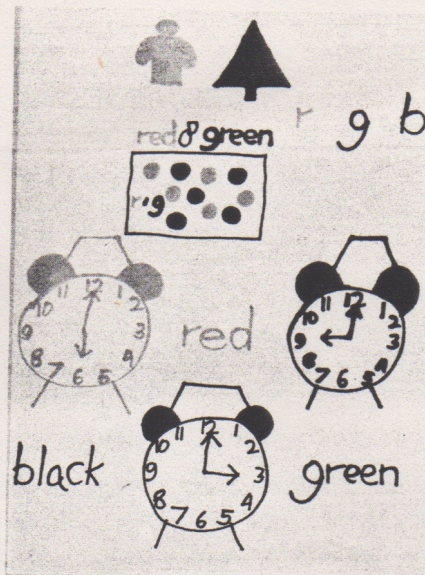
Jared Bark, *Untitled*, 1979. Courtesy Holly Solomon.

That its irony is the issue troubling me most in Naïf Nouveau reminds me of my ambivalent relations with that most elusive of phenomena, Camp. One of Susan Sontag's delicious descriptions of Camp distinguishes the unselfconscious from the conscious variety: "The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious. The Art Nouveau craftsman who makes a lamp with a snake coiled around it is not kidding, nor is he trying to be charming. He is saying, in all earnestness, "Voilà! The Orient!" Naïf Nouveau's lack of sincerity — its stylishly educated choice to abandon education and feign naivety — makes it difficult to determine its intentionality. Self-conscious affectation of the genuine naïf's preconscious behavior is what the Naïf Nouveau attitude is about. The Naïf Nouveau artist who makes a simple image on canvas or piece of paper is maybe kidding, maybe disingenuous. He or she is saying, a double-edge to his/her tone, "Voilà! Art! Voilà! Expression". Figuring out whether or not this affectation is responsible for good art is the tricky issue.

II.

It's time to be specific, to name names. When I say Naïf Nouveau, I'm not talking about an organized movement or school (should I say preschool?). Although Richard Marshall designated some of these artists as New Imagists in his show at the Whitney in 1978, "New Image Painting," and Douglas Crimp included others in his exhibition "Pictures" at Artist's Space in 1977, I'm talking about a slightly more inclusive sensibility of the Simple whose attributes can be seen in the work of Nicholas Africano, Jared Bark, Troy Brautuch, Eric Fischl, Michael Hurson, Neil Jenney, Christopher Knowles, Lois Lane, Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, Thomas Law-

son, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, David Salle and Jeff Way. There's no manifesto of Naïf Nouveau, and I can feel most of these artists cringing at being designated as such. There is, however, a house organ of NN, *Real Life Magazine*, edited by Lawson and addressing issues that seem to be on the minds (and definitely in the works) of its practitioners: pop culture, play activity (much in the intellectualized spirit of Hui-zinga's *Homo Ludens*), music, and movies. A smattering of the techniques they employ: Jenney makes fingerpaintings (at least they seem to



Christopher Knowles, *Untitled*, 1979. Courtesy Holly Solomon.

be made that way), Bark builds matchstick houses, Levine draws silhouettes of famous profiles (American presidents and the like), Knowles makes stream-of-conscious doodles with magic marker on paper. Although methods and materials vary, the Peter Pan aspect of "I won't grow up, I don't wanna go to school" pervades the work.

Enough with generalities. I've described the territory, now its time to investigate the specific terrain, with more or less random observations on individual meanings of individual artists, who are listed not in any order of preference, but alphabetically.

Nicholas Africano: his tiny relief figures drawn on vast canvases. An existential crisis prevails, the outside world (represented by the canvas ground) is fog, the only things that have dimension are the figures: Self — for these are often self-portraits. And childlike ones at that, for the figure sees itself as center (and one and only) of the canvas' world. Other kid-like aspects: an elementary school art project idea of what relief painting is — figures bulge rather than have real shape; a fondness for kiddie pastel color; small scale of figures in relation to canvases; cartoon narrative relations between canvases, as between comic strip frames. Africano repudiates Modernism, glorifies the anxious subject.

Jared Bark: Years ago, his photo-booth pieces seemed the apotheosis of solipsistic horseplay: who hadn't wanted a photo booth of one's own to act out all one's home movie fantasies? Not all his subsequent pieces qualify for NN distinction, but one series that definitely does is Bark's "Burning House," where he builds matchstick houses and proceeds to scorch them with flames. People who live in matchstick houses shouldn't throw flames: Bark does, giv-

ing his work the demonic effect of a child pyromaniac. And this aspect connects his work with process art — like the house with traces of its own burning. Hostile humor is the hallmark of his work; to live with Bark's burning houses is like babysitting the Bad Seed.

Troy Brautuch: the Joseph Cornell of Naïf Nouveau, which suggests on the whole sensibility



Jeff Way, *Fred and son*, 1979. Courtesy Pam Adler, New York.

Eric Fischl: is all about content. Preoccupation with 1940s and 1950s Americana. Women in padded-shoulder *Mildred Pierce* suits. Turquoise kidney = shaped swimming pools. Sometimes he makes images by using oilstick on glassine, making them appear like rainy afternoon projects of cryola and wax paper. He's interested in depicting cliché, but doesn't have any real opinion. Depiction is enough for Fischl; it's not enough for me.

Michael Hurson: Another artist, like Bark, whose work varies a great deal, but one of his series — the Pfaffs — is Naïf Nouveau because of its cartoony narrative and simplicity. Hurson, along with non-Naïfs Ida Applebroog and Steve Gianakos, is interested in appropriating low art for high purposes — which is also a trope of Philip Guston's, obsessed as he was with Krazy Kat. Hurson is a borderline Naïf Nouveau case. There's a great deal of sophistication in his apparent lack of it. His recent work — plays and neo-Constructivist portraiture — puts his total oeuvre out of consideration.

Neil Jenney: In many ways, the spiritual father of Naïf Nouveau. His canvases of the late 1960s (has anyone seen work of his dated after 1969?) gave many artists a venue out of Minimalism and more restricted varieties of Modernism. These seeming fingerpaintings of banal subjects are expressionistic and post-Impres-