SUBCONSCIOUS EYE

JOHN A. KURTZ
PAUL LAMANTIA
BRUCE THORN

APRIL 5 – JUNE 2, 2013

UKRAINIAN INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
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Subconscious Eye

*Subconscious Eye* brings together the work of three artists who penetrate the surface of everyday experience in order to immerse themselves in realms beyond consciousness. Their engagement with this territory varies immensely as the sources and aims of their art rarely overlap with one another. Yet there is a serendipitous harmony in this ensemble. Each pushes his form and subject matter to aesthetic extremes in order to convey the overwhelming intensity of that trip to the void. The bodies in Paul Lamantia’s (b. 1938) aggressively sexual vignettes elongate, pucker, birth bestial heads where limbs should be, and multiply their identities before our eyes. While owls, parrots, and other wildlife sprout up in John A. Kurtz’s (b. 1942) terrestrial fireworks but they hum with electricity, sprout oversized eyes amid feathers, and bear openings in their bodies that allow the observer to see through to the landscape beyond. Swirling, mutating, dissolving into one another, the forms and fields in Bruce Thorn’s (b. 1952) paintings perpetuate motion, suggesting improbable connections between amoeba and supernovae. Each work is almost too much to take in; an assault on the senses that intellect and emotion wrestle to balance. They bear the legacy of a cultural shift that made interior (psychological) space and subjectivity the equal of crisp empiricism. The political, social, and spiritual impact of this shift reverberates throughout their work.

Kurtz’s imagery often starts simple with a central motif, such as a head or an animal depicted with relative naturalism, and gradually transmogrifies into a cacophonous world that practically spills forth with sound. His imagery has developed from innumerable sketchbook pages bearing drawings from life, from nature. As it is with Thorn and Lamantia, this is simply a starting point for transformations that occur organically in the process. What may have been a straightforward image becomes intensified to the point of throbbing hysteria. Otherwise smooth surfaces on objects and creatures yield to holes, windows (always filled with views into the cosmos or eccentric machinery), colored fissures, bubbles, faces, and growths. To catalogue the anomalies, interruptions, and embedded patterns would take every page of this entire publication. Among the most extraordinary examples of this hypertrophic additive process is *Crazy Man (self-portrait)* of 2010. Kurtz’s head is alive and on fire, erupting with life forms that pay no attention to scale or local color. The Aztec deity of war and the sun, Huitzilopochtli comes to mind; there is that intensity to his radiance and edge of menace to his mask. Here is an otherworldly devotional image about the nature of transformation – an apt metaphor for an artist’s process.

Bruce Thorn, like Kurtz and Lamantia, was born in Chicago but he has lived in Greece, Liberia, Ivory Coast, and Oregon. He credits his early years in Monrovia for instilling
a sense of magic in the world. “I grew up with an old world sense of animism, a comprehension that everything has a life and energy of its own...I played in the streets with West Africans...Monrovia was small. Snakes ran over my feet, monkeys walked the streets at times, bananas and papayas could be plucked off of trees.”

Accordingly, Thorn’s work seethes with energy, whether the turbulent churning of *Reef* (2010) or the steady vibration in *Say I am You* (2013). *A Day With You* (2009) sustains several simultaneous streams of motion, layered upon and interleaved into one another. Against a ground of irregular pale blue and pink wedges Thorn drizzled and dribbled cadmium red paint. Over that he added a thin biomorpic screen of overlapping, looped and curled blue lines. He filled the spaces created by the crossed lines with gold, red, purple and two tones of green. The fills are also irregular, following no obvious pattern for shape, interval of color, or ratio of solid to open tracery. The resulting field calls to mind visual scores, with multiple instrumental voices arrayed against shifting, contrasting meters. Its simultaneity is an elegant balance of chaos and order. It is not surprising that Thorn is also a musician.

*Reef* is structured in a similar way in that Thorn began with a rough improvised ground (of gray and white) that gives the surface an organic texture that plays upon the reference to the marine habitat. Here the filled-in writhing forms gain volume and animation through the addition of tonal gradations and shining highlights that heighten the sense of teeming life. While Thorn has avoided any specific reference to aquatic creatures, the tossing and turning, swelling and diving torrent he has patched together suggests an ocean feeding frenzy. *Reef* comes out of his experience as a diver and reveals the intensity with which he translates lived experience and sensation through abstraction.

Thorn sees a relationship between diving and the process of mining the unconscious. He notes, “These places could be seen as metaphors for mysticism, the subconscious (underwater, under the surface) or the collective subconscious. I know that most people do not see life everywhere and do not look at a boulder or a leaf and see it as a living thing with its own dance of life. I don’t paint fish or insects under rocks, I try to make painting be a dance that mirrors that explosion of life and energy. I want painting to be life itself, not just an illustration of life.”

This emphasis on painting as a living entity that – without representational content – materializes as an equivalent of experience rather than a depiction of it reveals Thorn to be part of a lineage of artists that include Arthur G. Dove, Agnes Martin, Richard Pousette-Dart, Theodoros Stamos, Mark Tobey, James Turrell, and others who developed a new visual language for experience through experience.
Each of these artists found profound inspiration in nature, though wished to avoid illustrating the particulars of nature. In Toby’s case, his work also came out of his communion with the divine and meditation on the infinite. Thorn’s work also has a close relationship to meditation in its focus on what is often a single motif repeated, shifted slightly, multiplied and brought back into focus. While this happens in several works, it is most evident in *Say I Am You*.

*Boiling Point* and *Say I Am You* show Thorn working with two completely different approaches to composition and content. The former painting has the appearance of a map or an aerial view of a place where sea eddies between rocky tendrils and whips the fringe edges of the land. The entire picture seethes, glowing hot and raw despite the cool sensation that the blue brings to the eye. *Boiling Point* is a good example of how Thorn’s work, though abstract, conjures numerous analogies. Although the imaginary geography is suggestive, bodily associations also spring forth because of the coiled and flailed out brushstrokes which make the orange and red appear like folds in the surface of the brain or unraveled nerves exposed and twitching. It is an image that seems to conduct emotion, like live wires spitting forth electric sparks at their ends. Whether micro or macro, of the body or of the earth, Thorn’s painting alludes to the interconnectedness of all things, manifest through analogous forms.

*Say I am You* is a vortex painting, an image of which Thorn has made once every few years. This iteration was composed painstakingly over two years through the gradual accretion of tiny dots. An inherently meditative practice, echoing in form and meaning Australian aboriginal painting and North American Indian sand painting, it has a swelling sonority that hypnotizes. There is a magnetic pull to the image, making it at once also an image of the void, which need not be an abyss. The void has many associations, pregnant with possibilities, a place of silence, of oblivion, of selflessness. Thorn’s painting exudes a powerful force on the viewer as though the image is in communion with the body. It seems to simultaneously conduct and transmit energy.

While Kurtz’s work draws upon close observation and Thorn’s reverence for nature drives his method and imagery, Lamantia’s work comes most directly from his subconscious. An artist who remains too-little known despite his vast exhibition record and presence in significant collections, Lamantia’s fringe status within the last four decades of art in Chicago may be entirely due to his subject matter. There is nothing unusual in a particular strain of Chicago’s artworld of dealing with the body, sexuality, and transgressive practices. Lamantia’s exact contemporaries, Robert Lostutter, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, and even Christina Ramberg did not shy away from such subjects. Rather than confine it to a segment of a larger body of art or embed it in details that dot or surround other narratives, Lamantia has made that the focus of his work.
The scale and ferocity of some of his paintings have a visceral power that can overshadow his subtle and carefully considered underlying network of references.

Lamantia’s extensive training at the American Academy of Art and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago gave him the confidence to compose large complex figure paintings of interlocked figures in unusual environments. A perceptive and voracious consumer of art history and inveterate traveler to museum collections, Lamantia has been inspired by a wide range of art of the past, including 16th century Venetian painting and the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Edgar Degas. He has also looked hard at Indian miniatures as well as the work of outrageous American cartoonist, Basil Wolverton. In 1964 as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago he discovered Dr. Hans Prinzhorn’s (1886-1933) *Artistry of the Mentally Ill: A Contribution to the Psychology and Psychopathology of Configuration* (first published in 1922). Prinzhorn’s book, with its then radical assertion that artwork by patients suffering from a wide range of mental disorders could have intellectual and aesthetic significance, has been a critical reference point for Lamantia. It inspired him to allow similar hallucinatory and uninhibited qualities to drive his work. In 1972, after studying Art Brut on his own, Lamantia had the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas on art with Jean Dubuffet.

Lamantia’s extraordinary drawings from the late 1960s through the early 1970s remain among the least well-known, understudied bodies of work among artists of his generation. They represent some of his earliest and most raw compositions in which he let his subconscious direct form, structure and content. These drawings were important in that they became a critical means by which he allowed unfiltered frightening and ecstatic ideas to manifest in pictorial form. Lamantia gained notoriety and critical acclaim for work he developed in the early 1970s, often depicting groups of figures engaged in highly ritualized sexual acts. Much more controlled and deliberately composed than the late 1960s drawings, they emulate Italian Renaissance and Mannerist structure in their arrangements. Lamantia has continued to compose complex multi-figure paintings with close consideration of traditional approaches to composition and structure. This has helped frame the difficult and potentially upsetting activities taking place in the work. Only rarely, as in a fascinating 2009-10 series of intimate and fantastic self-portraits has Lamantia emphasized the materiality of paint, the expressive capacity of gestural accident, and flirted with abstraction.

*False Prophets* (1991) represents the genre for which Lamantia is best known. Four figures, three of them recognizably female, sit or lie in an interior that is decorated with brightly colored drapes and divans. Each of the three women wear highly stylized, complex skin-tight lingerie and fetish clothing including a corset, caps that fit over their nipples, and menacing fishnets. Each is masked, though the relationship of mask to true identity, and the nature of what we see is destabilized and fraught with anxiety.
The woman seated on the far right brings this into sharp focus. Her dark profile appears as the most conventional depiction of a face in the painting. Yet on close scrutiny that seems to be her mask, partially concealing a head that reveals a large green and yellow eye and open mouth bristling with needle-sharp teeth. Which is the true self? Between her legs rests a pale oversized head tilted away from the viewer and connected to a body protruding from the floor. On the far left, a woman whose mask (or head) is elongated into a sharp metal-gray beak bends her legs upward as she adjusts herself to reveal that the limbs have transformed into snarling toothsome beasts. Is this an allegory of lust? A confessional hallucination about sexual anxiety? Or a vision witnessed in an altered state transcribed for the viewer to sort out? Lamantia’s work rarely resolves itself into easy answers and its power lies in its ability to suggest multiple meanings.

Two additional works featured in this exhibition, Hollywood Sacrifice and The Collector of Unfulfilled Dreams have a direct correspondence to specific narratives. The former was inspired by Lamantia’s close following of the 1994-95 O. J. Simpson murder trial. Lamantia considers it a commentary on celebrity murders and the media circus that surrounds any sensationalist yet horrific event. The latter is Lamantia’s exhilarating and unnerving reworking of the Garden of Eden story; in this case a three-headed demon in the center of the picture presents the bitten apple to the viewer, as though a ringmaster in the fall of humankind. Each demonstrates the strong relationship Lamantia has with surrealist painting’s strategies of controlled irrationality crafted to conjure meanings that resonate with the human condition.

The art of Kurtz, Lamantia, and Thorn carries a sense of visitation, as though each artist was haunted by spectres in the room – spectres of experience, real and imagined, which materialize and dissolve, speak without words, gesture slowly or quietly stare from the other side. These apparitions need not instill terror, though in some instances it is evident that they do. Visitation is welcome, if unpredictable, in the creative process. There is also an uncanny sense through the work of a hidden universe that stretches out just beyond a transparent veil in our environment. Sometimes we inadvertently catch a glimpse through to that parallel realm. When we attempt to describe it to others it can seem psychotic or at best, “visionary” (but still “irrational”). But what do we expect of artists? We often look to art to expand our consciousness and our experience of the world. As agents of these altered states, artists must necessarily leave the known world for the otherworldly and report back. It requires a finely tuned subconscious eye to accomplish that as well as see what they have translated to their world.

Robert Cozzolino
Senior Curator and Curator of Modern Art
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia
John A. Kurtz, born November 8, 1942, in Chicago, Illinois, began his education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1960 on a scholarship received from the Park Ridge Art League. In 1962 he joined the U.S. Navy and worked as a Naval-Air photographer for a 4 year enlistment. Since the late 1960’s John’s photography, drawings, paintings and 3-D sculptures have been exhibited at various museums, galleries and studios throughout Chicago and Illinois including: The Art Institute of Chicago, Hyde Park Art Center, DePaul University Stuart Center, University of Illinois Ward Gallery, Rockford Art Museum, Evanston Art Center, The Chicago Cultural Center, Zaks Gallery, Ann Nathan Gallery and currently at Hauser Gallery in Chicago. Kurtz also exhibits his work at annual Studio Shows.


Mr. Kurtz’ work is in the collections of, Ms. Kathy Upjohn, Mr. Howard Tullman, Mr. Thomas Kieft, Dr. David and Cristina Evaskus, Mr. and Mrs Joe Silverberg, Diane and Mickey Brown, Mr. Marc Hauser, Ralph Gaby and Susan Wilson of Pasadena Ca., among others.
John A. Kurtz
Clown Woman, 2012
Acrylic on canvas
22 x 18 in.
John A. Kurtz
Yellow Parakeet, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 36 in.
John A. Kurtz
Alien Abduction, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 24 in.
John A. Kurtz
Untitled Yellow Owl, 2007
Acrylic on canvas
30 x 24 in.
John A. Kurtz
Clown Woman, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
15 x 15 in.
John A. Kurtz
Crazy Man
(self-portrait), 2010
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 24 in.
John A. Kurtz
Untitled Man with Parakeet, 2011
Acrylic on canvas
15 x 15 in.
John A. Kurtz
Bat Clown, 2009
Acrylic on Celluclay
Ht. 15 in.
John A. Kurtz  
Mistress of the Moon, 2013  
Acrylic on Celluclay  
Ht. 18"
PAUL LAMANTIA

MFA (1968) The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

The Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Medal, Art Institute of Chicago 1984 (Purchase Prize)


Paul LaMantia: A Review 1967-1982, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago (Mid-Career Retrospective)

Invited to Paris, France by Jean Dubuffet to exchange ideas on art (1972)


Selected Permanent Public Collections
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Ill.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wis.
The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago
The Collection of Jean Dubuffet, Paris, France
Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio
The Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa
The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, Hawaii
The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
The Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Publications
Paul Lamantia
Rubber Rose at Moulin Rouge, 2012
Oil on canvas
60 x 72 in.
Paul Lamantia, Taught by Default, 1991, Oil on canvas, 60.5 x 72.25 in.
Paul Lamantia
Blood Love, 1993
Oil on canvas
60 x 48 in.
Paul Lamantia
Hollywood Sacrifice, 1995
Oil on canvas
66 x 78 in.

Paul Lamantia
Smoke, 1993
Oil on canvas
60 x 48 in.
Paul Lamantia
False Prophets, 1991
Oil on canvas
60.5 x 72.25 in.

Paul Lamantia
BLT, 2001
Oil on canvas
60 x 63 in.
Paul Lamantia
Forbidden Reflections, 2012
Oil on canvas
48 x 60 in.
Paul Lamantia
The Collector of Unfulfilled Dreams, 2012
Oil on canvas
72 x 60 in.
BRUCE THORN

Selected Exhibitions
2011 Union League Club, Chicago, IL: solo exhibition
2006 Flaten Art Museum, Northfield, MN: Bruce Thorn and Liz Quisgard
2003 New Prints 2003, Fall, International Center for the Print, New York, NY
2001 Influence Chicago Influence, Arena Gallery, Chicago, IL
2000 Les Chemical Carnales, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL
1996 Zaks Gallery, Chicago, IL: solo exhibition
1995 Oregon Biennial, Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon
1994 Davidson Galleries, Seattle, WA: solo exhibition
1986 Zaks Gallery, Chicago, IL: Bruce Thorn and Bruce Thayer
1985 Susan Whitney Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada: solo exhibition

Grants And Residencies
2011 and 2006 Foundation SLAK, Arnhem, Netherlands
1994 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, New York, NY

Education
1987 MFA in Painting, University of Illinois at Chicago, IL
1975 BFA in Painting and Drawing, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL

Bibliography
2006 Abstract Imagist, Corbett vs. Dempsey Publications
2004 4th Triennial of Graphic Arts Prague 2004, Arbor Vitae Publications

Public Collections
St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN
Roger Brown Study Collection, Chicago, IL
Bruce Thorn
Trophy Muse, 2012
Oil on linen
30 x 84 in.
Bruce Thorn, Reef, 2010, Oil on linen, 68 x 90 in.
Bruce Thorn
High Line Ramble, 2012
Oil on linen
60 x 37 in.
Bruce Thorn
Boiling Point, 2012
Oil on linen
43 x 61 in.
Bruce Thorn
Happy Mistress, 2009
Oil on linen
48 x 112 in.
Bruce Thorn, A Day With You, 2009, Oil on linen, 68 x 90 in.
Bruce Thorn, Whistling In Hell, 2012, Oil on linen, 37 x 57 in.
Bruce Thorn
Bling Bling Pirates, 2012
Oil on linen
30 x 84 in.
Bruce Thorn
Say I Am You, 2013
Oil on linen
46 x 46 in.
Catalog produced for exhibition at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art (UIMA)

April 5 – June 2, 2013

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Acknowledgements:

Essay:
Robert Cozzolino, Senior Curator and Curator of Modern Art, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

Lenders to the Exhibition:
Nellie Lamantia
Sheryl R. Johnson
Ray Ebinger
Mickey and Diane Brown - Clown Woman, 2011
David and Cristina Evaskus - Untitled, 2004
Peggy O’Neill and Paul Ziesler - Nude with Red Hair, 2011

Photography Credits:
Jonas Dovydenas
Tom Van Eynde
Mel Theobald

Curator, catalog design:
Stanislav Grezdo

Thanks to:
Martin and Helen Flink
Sheryl R. Johnson
Cecilia Thorn
UIMA Art Committee