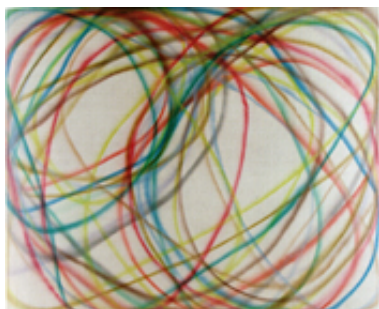




Carolee Schneemann performing *Body Collage* in her loft on West 29th Street, 1967



Dan Christensen
Pavo
1968
Collection of the artist



Alan Shields
Whirling Dervish
1968-70
Estate of Alan Shields

GET ME A BRUSH, STAT!

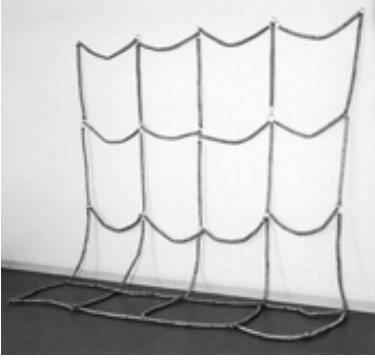
by Jerry Saltz

"High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967 to 1975," Feb. 15-Apr. 22, 2007, at the National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts, 1083 Fifth Ave, New York, N.Y. 10128

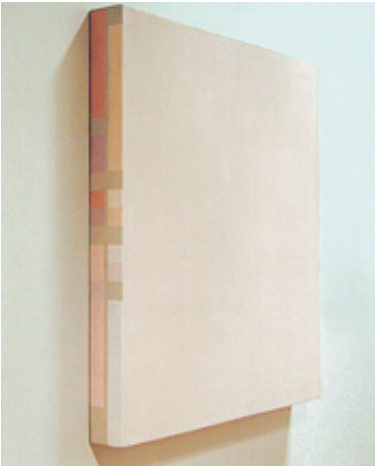
"High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975" is a saber-waving, opinion-altering show, for the simple if thrilling reason that it posits an art-historical missing link. It's composed entirely of abstract work made by painters who were born too late to be Pop artists or hard-core Minimalists, and who then tried to take the medium to less structured and splashy, more intuitive and experimental shores. On the sober side, "High Times" suggests that the best if only shot many people will ever have at recognition is if some diligent curator pieces together these missing links and presents the result. "High Times" does just that, focusing on a generation of artists, most born in the '30s and '40s, who altered art, however slightly, and who were then mostly forgotten. It offers a tantalizing glimpse at that up-for-grabs period beginning in 1967 when painting passed through what has been called "the eye of the post-minimal-conceptual needle" and 1975, when it was declared dead.

Even during the last days of the show, you could spot curious art students mooning over these eccentric abstractions. With good reason. The exhibition, which looks fresh and almost funny amid the beautifully preserved Beaux-Arts froufrou of the National Academy, is a storehouse of forgotten genres and dormant tropes. It is so informative and intrepid that it should shame other American institutions with more space, money and loan-procuring clout into mounting similarly exploratory and chancy shows.

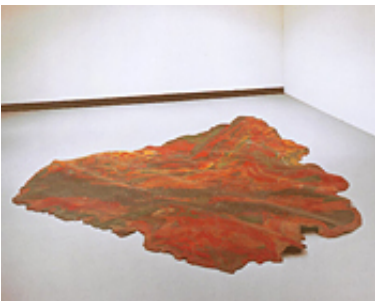
Here, curator Katy Siegel teams up with well-known painter David Reed in a show (circulated by Independent Curators International) that is alluring even as you acknowledge its problems. As is often the case with Siegel, her ideas can be stronger than her eye -- questionable inclusions and exclusions arise, oddball juxtapositions distract. Yet the thing that raises this exhibition above these shortcomings and makes it a combination morality play and



Howardina Pindell
Untitled
1968-70
Courtesy Sragow Gallery



Cesar Paternosto
El Sur
1969
Courtesy Celia de Torres Ltd.



Lynda Benglis
Blatt
1969
Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Reid

Dickens novel is that "High Times" also contains its evil twin, "Hard Times." If you set aside conspiracy theories, and ignore the fact that sociological, sexual and racial factors often do stack the art-world deck against certain artists, this show allows you to understand why some moments are more doomed to the dustbin of history than others.

First the "high" part. Set the Wayback Machine for 1971, the midpoint of the show, and the place to downtown New York. The fast action and grand movements of the '60s are over. Art is living on its own, out of the limelight; artists are occupying cheap lofts and hustling odd jobs. Almost no one is making money from art, and anyone who does is considered a sellout or a critical failure. Video, sculpture and performance are flowering, but painting is in trouble. Many say it's through.

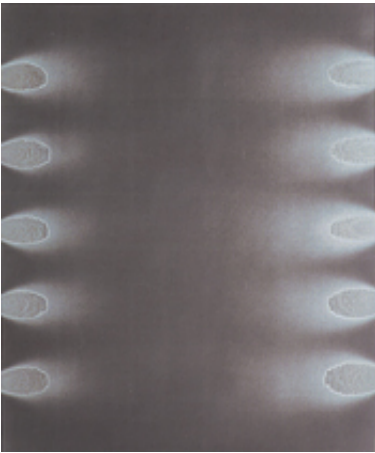
This causes a sizable segment of the New York art world to transform itself into a kind of ER unit and set to work on reviving the dying body. Art is turned into a problem, something to solve and move along incrementally, one issue, surface, color and compositional tic at a time. Artists crinkle, cut and shred canvas. They coat it with sand, spray it with oil, rip it apart and sew it back together. Many dispense with stretchers entirely, painting on walls or providing only written instructions for others to follow. At the National Academy you can see how Lynda Benglis became a female Pollock by simply pouring latex paint on the floor to make psychedelic pancakes, Ron Gorchov made painting almost primitive in his curved shield-shapes, and Harmony Hammond returned the medium to its medicinal roots with circular floor mandalas made of fabric. Dan Christensen's wobbly spray-painted ovals suggest drug-induced space, and Carolee Schneemann's video of herself writhing around the floor pasting her naked body with paper shows how she wanted to be a high priestess, a star and a living painting.

Within a few years, everyone was in agreement about what had to be done. As P.J. O'Rourke recently said about "boomer humor," this was "probably the one generation on Earth with the most points of reference in common." Those reference points allowed artists to band together into a kind of creative commune. Yet this hive-mindedness spawned academicism and tautology as painting's emergency room devolved into an isolation unit, then a prison. Enter "Hard Times."

For all the utopianism and experimentalism, painting was subjected to rules. Strict ones. It had to be abstract and be about itself. It couldn't be expressionistic or figurative; the grid was God and monochrome was king; narrative was out; ambition was frowned on. Thus painting was fetishized and turned into an ideology. The artists of "High Times"



Joe Overstreet
Purple Flight (from the "Purple Pattern" series)
1971
Courtesy Kenkeleba Gallery



Michael Venezia
Untitled
1971
Courtesy Rolf Hengesbach



Harmony Hammond
Floor Piece V
1973
Courtesy Dwight Hackett Projects

pumped juice into painting but ended up embalming it and themselves. Eventually, artistic moves became predictable, the scene turned in on itself, and New York painters mutated into something only other New York painters made or cared about. "Hard Times" ends in 1975, when hope was still in the air. By 1978, however, the scene was stultifying. By 1980, many of these artists were fading into the background as painting retook the stage as a kind of global, if mostly male, Goliath.

Making matters worse, the provincialism of the late '70s set in at the exact moment when far ranging and less dogmatic approaches were appearing. Painters all over the world were beginning to sidestep New York's dogma and make paintings that were big, brash, figurative and narrative. The worm turned in New York as well. Numerous younger painters cast aside the rules and were painting on the streets and in nightclubs; others collaged photographs into paintings; still others returned to the most forbidden things of all, figuration and narrative. As high as the New York painters took painting, they overcoded the medium, made it about competency and catchy hooks, and limited it.

By the early '80s there was no single direction in painting, and thankfully, there hasn't been one since. New York finally became just one of many centers, and painting was transformed into a Hydra, coming from all over, rather than a one-eyed Cyclops that lived only on the island of Manhattan. Painting gave up its bunker mentality and came out of its cave. The rest is history as we know it. 30 years on, New York is now the trading floor, which is creating new problems as art is awash in money, attention and hype. The art in "High Times" isn't better than the art being made today. It isn't purer. But the show is rife with untapped painterly DNA. It is an amazing trip to a time and place when the market had nothing to do with history and art was guided only by artists acting on their own. So much so that some may feel their insurrectionary instincts stirring.

Matthew Barney, the Bull and the Chrysler

It seemed appropriate that on that quasi-apocalyptic Sunday afternoon when the nor'easter sky released eight inches of rain on New York City that Matthew Barney had a rare live performance. In an enormous empty one-story warehouse not 20 feet from the East River in Long Island City, a standing crowd of around 200 populated by numerous art-student types, famous artists like Cindy Sherman and Vito Acconci, sundry museum curators, and icons like David Byrne and Björk witnessed what seemed like a cosmic cross between an Egyptian funeral, the end of the world, the Rape of Europa, a demolition derby, a porn film, and voodoo ritual. Whatever it was, it freaked a lot of people out.



Ron Gorchov
Cockrobin
1975
Private collection

With good reason. The 80-minute performance included a sculpture of a smashed-to-smithereens 1967 Chrysler; Barney performing with a dog sitting in a harness on top of his head; Aimee Mullins, the famous no-legged athlete who co-starred in one of Barney's epic *Cremaster* films, outfitted in a full-length glittering silver ball gown on a stretcher atop the car; a small marching band in terrorist masks and what looked like IRA military uniforms; Barney methodically removing bits of the car's engine and putting them in these weird funeral urns; and, last but not least, a gigantic bull garlanded in flowers with its long, huge horns painted gold.

This bull was not only led in from outdoors by handlers dressed in tartan plaid; it was accompanied by two women, each wearing a black veil and a black sweatshirt but otherwise bottomless below the waist, and shaved. At some point, after walking around the crowd several times, each woman held her arms aloft and bent over backward until their hands touched the ground. Then, one of the girls emitted an arc of pee onto the cement floor. The other seemed to want to also but couldn't. Who could blame her? It was freezing in there.

The bull was guided to the Chrysler. It appeared as though it was being coaxed to mount the car, but after three tries, the tenders took the bull back outside. All the performers followed and that was the end of this astonishing Dionysian journey to the afterlife. How great it is when an artist is willing to fail flamboyantly and then ends up making something extraordinary; what amazing things can happen in New York any time anyone wants to make them happen.



Matthew Barney with Aimee Mullins [left] in *Cremaster 3*

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Matthew Barney, performance still from *Guarding of the Veil* (2007)
Photo by Paula Court