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Jumping Genres and Generations in Art

By Jess Frost

(6/03/2008) "I guess I have a reputation as a painting guy," Klaus Kertess said, an understatement to be sure. Proof of his propensity for painting can be found at "The Annual Hamptons Show," an exhibit opening tomorrow, and running through June 16, that he has curated for the Fireplace Project in Springs.



Morgan McGivern
 Klaus Kertess at home in East Hampton

Mr. Kertess lives in East Hampton with his partner, the artist Billy Sullivan. As a writer and curator he has worked for any number of highly respected museums, but his success seems to have as much to do with his departure from such positions as with the prestige they have brought him.

In 1966 Mr. Kertess founded, with John Byers, the influential Bykert Gallery in New York, where he acted as director for almost 10 years, exhibiting burgeoning artists such as Brice Marden, Chuck Close, Agnes Martin, and Joe Zucker, who is represented in the Fireplace Project exhibit.

"It was a starter gallery essentially, when I look back on it," Mr. Kertess said. "What gave me pleasure was showing somebody for the first time and trying to clear a path for them into the art world."

"Part of the reason I left the gallery was because I was going to have to become a career manager more than anything else, and that wasn't what I did well. There were other issues as well: I started writing and I needed to see what my commitment to that was."

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"The Giant Between Us 2" by Darius Yektai

After leaving Bykert, Mr. Kertess held various part-time positions. He was the Robert Lehman curator at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, as well as adjunct curator of drawing at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Mr. Kertess's last full-time post was curating the 1995 Whitney Biennial. Shortly thereafter he started working freelance instead.

"It's always been hard for me to work for someone else," he said. "I really valued my experience at the Whitney after the Biennial . . . but I didn't want to go on, I needed to be independent."

And prolifically independent he was, an example being the four exhibits he produced on Willem de Kooning, including "Willem de Kooning: Drawing Seeing/Seeing Drawing," at the Drawing Center in New York City in 1998, and "Willem de Kooning: In Process" for the Menil Collection in Houston in 2000. Both were traveling shows, and the latter came to Guild Hall in East Hampton in the summer of 2000.

"I spent four years of my life with de Kooning's work, which wasn't really planned, but it just kept happening; the work is so rich. I kept thinking, 'Oh, you can't do another show.' . . . I could never have done the de Kooning shows if I had a gallery."

Mr. Kertess has also written books about de Kooning as well as about Jane Freilicher, Joan Mitchell, and Brice Marden, not to mention many catalog essays. Most recently he contributed an essay to the book "John Chamberlain: The Foam Sculptures," focusing on work exhibited at the Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton last year.

While many who write about art keep the reader at arm's length, Mr. Kertess often uses metaphor as an inroad. His writing brings a fleshy quality to the communion wafer that is artspeak without neglecting the formal and contextual aspects of criticism and theory.

In a 1984 essay for the Parrish exhibit catalog, "Forming," for instance, he discusses 20th-century American sculpture as if sculpture itself were responsible for not being able to mutate into abstraction as readily as painting had in the 1950s.

"Sculpture hardly felt blessed by its godless, new freedom and clung tenaciously, if not always convincingly, to notions of public monument and mortality," he said in the essay.

His ability to put a human face on the more academic aspects of art not only increases the reader's understanding, but also encourages a more personal experience with the work itself.

Prior to this month's "Annual Hamptons Show," the most recent exhibit he curated on the South Fork was



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in the fall of 1998 for the 100th anniversary of the Parrish Art Museum. Titled “Sea Change,” it focused on the ocean’s influence on modernism in American painting. Organizing it was a labor of love, according to Mr. Kertess.

“We got a great Pollock from the Addison gallery in Andover, and also a Winslow Homer that was one of those great nighttime paintings with a sort of wave almost covering a fisherman. I was able to hang a Pollock next to a Ryder, which was a really big thrill for me. I mean, everyone knows that Pollock loved Ryder.”



“Jane”
by Billy Sullivan

The artworks, just over 30 of them, started in the 19th century and ended with Raymond Pettibon’s 25-foot wall painting of a wave.

This fall, Mr. Kertess will curate a group exhibit at the Mary Boone Gallery, which represents many established artists, such as Eric Fischl, David Salle, and Ross Bleckner, but has recently been inviting guest curators to produce group shows featuring less recognized ones.

The Boone exhibit is inspired by the inaugural show at the New Museum in New York City, “Unmonumental,” which focused on the low-tech assemblage sculpture that has been prevalent in contemporary art recently.

Mr. Kertess felt that many of the artists featured at the New Museum had been influenced, consciously or not, by Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg, whose “ideas are so much a part of our daily lives.” The exhibit at Mary Boone is intended to reflect that.

There is a fairly consistent principle to the way Mr. Kertess puts together a group show. By generation-jumping artists and movements, such as by pairing of Pollock and Ryder, he contextualizes promising unknowns with recognized artists whose work may have influenced them. The results lead to a deeper appreciation of both generations, as well as of the historical significance of their connections.

The exhibit at the Fireplace Project is another example of this curatorial inclination. It presents 11 painters, many of whom work in some form of gestural abstraction, such as Judy Hudson, whose acrylic and canvas paintings are collaged.

James Nares creates large-scale calligraphic, singular brushstroke paintings that straddle abstraction and Pop Art, while Tony Just combines the formal qualities of abstract painting with imagery and techniques from street culture such as text and graffiti.

Joe Zucker’s poured-paint constructions are paintings that seem greatly informed by sculpture. Mary Heilmann’s work varies from geometric to gestural, but its underlying strength is simplicity, a reminder of how hard it is to make a successfully uncomplicated painting.

Several artists appear to be more directly influenced by the environment and landscape. Michael Tetherow worked directly in nature, and his paintings are known for reflecting that experience. Robert Harms focuses his energetic mark-making on the South Fork’s flora and fauna, whereas Cynthia Knott’s paintings are teeming with its atmospheric light compressed by the water’s distinct horizon.

One might imagine figurative works to be less painterly than the landscape or

certainly the abstract, but Mr. Kertess's selection defies this notion. Billy Sullivan and Darius Yektai take a figurative approach, and Mr. Yektai shares the kind of intimate and informal style portraiture that has distinguished Mr. Sullivan.

The initiate of the exhibit, Jake Patterson, is a local high school student who came to Mr. Kertess's attention at a Bridgehampton Historical Society exhibit last winter. "He was in the show with a couple of self-portraits that were really boldly and beautifully painted for someone that young," the curator said.

"Once you start doing something like this, you realize how many more artists out here there are than you thought," Mr. Kertess said. "But there are still always people out here working away." The gallery, he said, "could do a whole season of group shows and still not cover what's happening."

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Jess Frost lives in Springs and likes art that is produced with a Sawzall.



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