

# Artweek

THE NATIONAL VOICE OF WEST COAST CONTEMPORARY ART

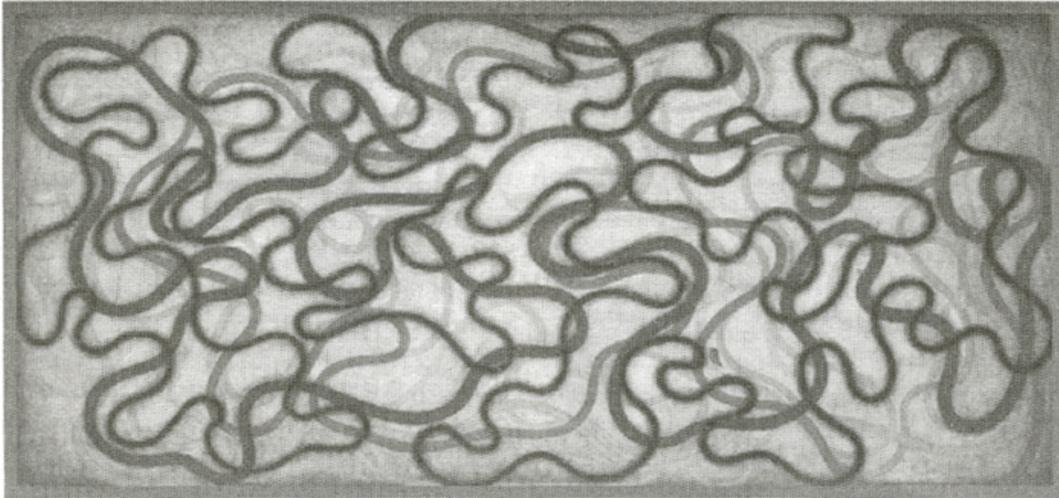
**April 2003**

## **D.A Bishop, Meg Hitchcock, and Frank Ryan at A Street Gallery**

Opened three years ago by Andrea Hibbard, A Street Gallery in Santa Rosa still retains the particulars of its recent past as artist co-op: gallery space up front, artists' studios in the back. Originally—and for many years—this large 1930s building located just off Highway 101 was several somethings automotive or industrial. Unlike the building's previous two manifestations, however, Hibbard has replaced the mechanical with the visual. D.A. Bishop, who is essentially self-taught, nudges into mid-career with paintings that exude an elegant dignity and gentle wit. He paints the odd architectural fringes of rural-urban America. What most would ignore as subject, Bishop discovers, investigates, and reveals as theater uninhabited by human actors. Buildings, houses and automobiles serve both as props for our imagining of who might occupy them as well as the characters, the personalities in each of his two-dimensional dramas.

In this exhibition, Bishop introduces the players familiar but new. A funky boat-house/house-boat structure: objectively nautical, land-bound by necessity, proudly constructed, yet distinctly eccentric. A jury-rigged, yet non-descript building of curious purpose in a once dwindling neighborhood now on the cusp of being “redeveloped.” Two elderly houses—*On Hayden Ave.*—banked in long shadowed twilight, conversing across a driveway like two old friends about yesterdays and the news of the neighborhood. And a 1950s Chevy, abandoned (perhaps) and derelict (but possessing potential redemption) sits amid discarded tires on the once-upon-a-time highway pavement in anywhere rural USA. These works are narratives, stories about places in and of themselves and as they relate to Michael Ondaatje's observation that “everything we write is semi-autobiographical prose or poetry.”

Meg Hitchcock has earned and enjoyed favorable reviews of late for her refreshingly idiosyncratic drawings. But here she paints, returning to a medium she recently noted she thought she might never do again. These paintings are filled with layers of endlessly beguiling serpentine lines. With all the linear gyrations and possibilities for surface tension, the work is mesmerizing, conjuring up a mystifying serenity. They are Gordian knots suspended in the process of nearly becoming unbound. Simultaneously effortless and intricate, they are like Zen puzzles—koans perhaps—enigmatic and revealing at once.



Meg Hitchcock, *Violet*, oil on linen, at A Street Gallery, Santa Rosa.

There is, however, a restrained yet distinctive depth to each. A subtle vortex of receding space is created by a foreground to background declination of color intensity in each succeeding circuitous line and emphasized by a delicate shadowing around the perimeter. The viewer begins the painting all over the intrepid surface, then—but only if patient enough to stay visually engaged—eases imperceptibly beneath and into seduction.

Frank Ryan's work is confrontational, in subject, composition and narrative context. In *Nothing Waits for Anything*, through a mid-night drizzle (or has the rain just stopped?), a man steals across a patio (or is he just now leaving?), looking back (as a voyeur or recent visitor?) inside a partially open sliding glass door at a woman reclining naked on a bed. A dilapidated umbrella (his or hers?), its handle a classic diagonal a classic diagonal invitation to enter the scene, lies prominently in the foreground. Ryan's images raise more questions than they answer.

And there is an ingenuous perversity, an impish depravity in all of his work. In *The Wax Mask*, a woman stands before a man sitting on a bed: she pulls on a pair of jeans; he looks toward her, his gaze partially obscured by a handheld mask. Is it he—or she— who needs (wants?) this circumstance played out behind the façade? And what of the ghosted figure just behind the seated man? Some psychological double entendre or leftover image from a previous painting?

The exhibition provides the singular opportunity to view the current work of three of this area's best painters. Little connects them, except a fortuitous same time, same place dimension and the ability to deftly handle paint. This is precisely—but not exclusively—why these three are as good as they are. Not just uncommon subject matter uniquely examined, but confident brush strokes whether studied or ingenious, distinctive palettes assertively and intuitively applied, and a fearless use of classic—and sometimes risky— composition.

—Sandy Thompson