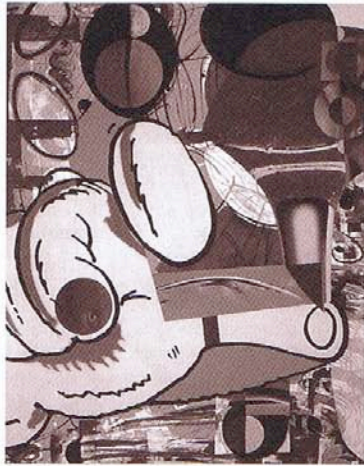


Darling, Michael. Review. *Art Issues* (January/February 1996), p. 44.



### Roy Dowell

at MARGO LEAVIN, 4 November–2 December

Roy Dowell's most recent combine paintings conspicuously reveal the fecund nature of his method. While Dowell has an immediately recognizable style—of tightly bound compositions cobbled from printed and hand-painted sources in high-keyed colors and varied textures—each of his works manages to distinguish itself as a unique product of an intuitive and organic process. Reperition and the exhaustion of gestures is nearly impossible, as he culls motifs from diverse scraps of commercial imagery—billboards, posters, and advertisements from the United States and Mexico—to constantly thwart visual stagnation. This is not to say that Dowell hasn't any preferred compositional schemes (like a fascination with circular interconnections); however, each of his visual essays is built upon a vocabulary of marks as heterogeneous as the visual world itself.

Dowell's brand of appropriation comes across as less a fatalistic acceptance of the author's demise than a faith in the regenerative potential of post-industrial excess—a body of visual material that can be guided by the right architect into a coherent and eloquent reflection on the history of optical communication. Dowell's collages of disjunctive found imagery address the challenge of *building* meaning from the rubble of history, not breaking it down into ever more obscure units of nihilistic niggling. Taking painting—that most embattled escarpment of artmaking—as the foundation for his practice, Dowell masterminds pictures where the inscrutable remnants of popular culture commingle on equal footing with the over-scrutinized figures of modern art history, resulting in a dynamic pictorial democracy.

Dowell's efforts in this show are divided along a distinct line demarcated by scale. The small, ruminative works on paper that received special attention in an exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1993 share the galleries with much larger works on wooden panels, a cohab-

itation dominated by the dizzying bravado of the big pieces. The centrally placed *Untitled #679* (1995), with its giant cartoonish hand reaching out toward the viewer from a chaotic space of whirling forms, emphatically states the goals of these oversized collages: to grab spectators by the eyeballs and take them on a vertiginous ride of associations. The size of these larger works, which are made up of correspondingly bolder bits and pieces of shapes, letters, numbers, and patterns, allows for a more commodious play of both illusionistic space and perceptual shifts of scale. *Untitled #657* (1994) is one such picture, featuring outsized blueberries bobbing around in what appears to be a galactic environment, in rough orbit around a partially illuminated planet. That the "planet" doubles as a sweaty hunk of cheese and the blueberries have a difficult time shaking their earthly beginnings only increases the liberating confusion of the work. The image of a shiny, spoked wheel from a BMW, a sketchy daisy, a floral cut-out of a bright Ben Day dot pattern, and a selectively snipped section of stewed tomatoes conspire in *Untitled #669* (1995) to form a complex, not-so-still-life that makes connections across a spectrum of normally dissociative phenomena. *Untitled #649* (1994) takes the language of abstraction as its theme, but its exuberant mixture of hard-edged geometries and goopy brushstrokes are almost exclusively comprised of ready-made passages. In each case, the artist bends, twists, and tweaks the banal into arrangements that allude to prior uses and configurations while simultaneously opening the floodgates for novel readings and revelations.

Dowell's analytic eye, his knack for balancing order and chaos, and the irrepressible wit that emanates from his collaged paintings are central to their success as aesthetically stimulating artworks; yet it is their less tangible hopefulness which makes them exemplary. Blueprints for *post-post-modernity*, Dowell's art prioritizes construction rather than deconstruction, and the making of new meanings rather than the lamentation of old ones.

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Roy Dowell  
*Untitled #679, 1995*  
Acrylic and collage on panel  
60" x 48"



purchased at the price of their purity. So even though Dowell appropriates some of the more, uh, ludic strategies from twentieth-century German art—from Heartfield and Schwitters, from Richter and Polke—he is not playing the game of collage, nor the game of abstraction; he is pursuing an objective. If the collage is in trouble, he rescues it with paint. Just like that. If the abstraction wobbles, he anchors it with an image. Right there. And we may infer from this strategy, I think, that Dowell’s objective is pretty much what we see: an extended series of achieved, improvisatory moments—little victories of which the images are a trace.

However, by practicing image-making as an art, like war, that has procedures but no rules, Dowell has also offhandedly demonstrated the extent to which “abstraction” and “collage,” as discrete idioms, have devolved in recent years into spectator sports which *have* rules—and referees, and fans who know the players and their stats—and it is a true measure of just how far these ambitious, twentieth-century inventions have decayed in practice, when Dowell can redeem them so gracefully by simply combining them to some end. By thoughtfully corrupting these “pure” genres, Dowell empowers his “impurities” to speak little parables on the morality of image-making.

Thus, the raucous interleaving of image and abstraction in these images addresses issues of optical economy and imperceptibility that were once the sole province of pure abstract painting. That seductive visual bounce in and out of signification that characterizes a good Ellsworth Kelly, for instance, is translated into visual narrative by Dowell’s whimsical, bravura excursions into contour continuation. Elegant lines swoop along the profiles of graphic letters, plunge through images and emerge, only to slip out along the edges of abstract fields. As the eye follows this traverse, that perpetual flashdance between the collaged structures of precognitive opticality and the ravishing language of visual desire is exquisitely slowed down, and we are relentlessly reminded of the eternal, flickering colloquy that constitutes the act of seeing.

In the composition of this visual calculus, however, Dowell dispenses with the Modernist ethos that holds the collagist to simply excerpting the world and redeeming it by rearrangement. Refusing the role of passive designer, Dowell casually resolves collaged passages with the impudent intervention of his own painted marks. In doing so, he simultaneously discloses and repudiates the goofy Bauhaus assumption that we can be “saved by design”—that whatever our difficulties, we can survive by suavely rearranging the world to suit our needs, without any creative or revolutionary intervention.

Further, by the simple intervention of his own hand, Dowell provides us with a cool critique of collage as it is practiced now—as an eco-sensitive form of sublimated shopping—and of the cultural determinism that still informs it. Today, of course, the aspiring collagueur, or assemblagette, either strolls the



**Roy Dowell**  
*Untitled #535, 1991*  
 Acrylic and collage on paper  
 9" x 6-7/8"



**Roy Dowell**  
*Horny Little Devil (#515), 1991*  
 Acrylic and collage on paper  
 9" x 6-7/8"



canapé table of cultural production, and selects those objects that most visibly evoke his or her “consumer identity”—or, in the role of Shopper as Other, selects those objects that most vividly symbolize the *impossibility* of confirming one’s identity by shopping, on account of the cultural spin of the goods available. Thus, those cruel appliances, upon which the marginalized shopper’s desire to consume is crucified, are readvertised and sentimentalized.

Both of these comforting, graduate-school agendas, of course, presume that we are helpless puppets in the grip of historical process—and presume further that (unlike the lofty giants of the advertising industry) we are bereft of opposed thumbs and can, therefore, make no marks—and that even if we could, we are blind when we close our eyes and cannot visualize our desire. And thus, unable to imagine our own political identities, we are doomed to take what the culture gives us, and diddle with it.

Of course, we need only to intervene and make one revolutionary mark to repudiate all this and speak, not in images, but in the *language* of images. But we do not, since elitist assumptions lie at the heart of our radical purity; if we make that mark, we break the rules that empower the connoisseurs, the daddies, the teachers, and the referees who might validate our radicality. In other words, we break the rules that make art into sport. Which brings us back to the first line of this essay, because even though Roy Dowell’s collages are doubtlessly informed by a benign longing to make just this good image—and this day good—they are the children of an external procedure that *replaces* the internalized cultural agendas that I have been describing. And these agendas, I fear, differ not at all from agendas that stood for “the soul” in late modern art—and generated legions of Day-Glo serial images.



The external procedures that empower Dowell’s images, however, do not stand in for the soul. They stand in for the *enemy*. They remind the artist of the adversarial nature of his intimate endeavor, and, as such, they approximate the procedural rigor that informs a soldier’s life and provides for the artist as well as the soldier a behavioral scaffolding from which to unleash the chaos at the heart of their calling. There are no rules in art and war—nor rules for disrupting the rules, for destabilizing the status quo, for proliferating cultural entropy. Only procedure, ingenuity, and loathing can sustain such agendas. So, good artists and good soldiers must be orderly creatures, if only to sustain the madness at the heart of their endeavor. And if this analogy between art and war seems a little grandiose, let me remind you that soldiers and artists are not generals and museum directors. Soldiers and artists fight for survival, in the dark, in the rain, to gain a little ground. Little victories are the best to which they can aspire.

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**Roy Dowell**  
*Untitled #538, 1991*  
Acrylic and collage on paper  
9" x 6-7/8"

**Roy Dowell**  
*Untitled #577, 1992*  
Acrylic and collage on paper  
9" x 6-7/8"

Photos: Douglas M. Parker  
Courtesy Rosamund Felsen Gallery