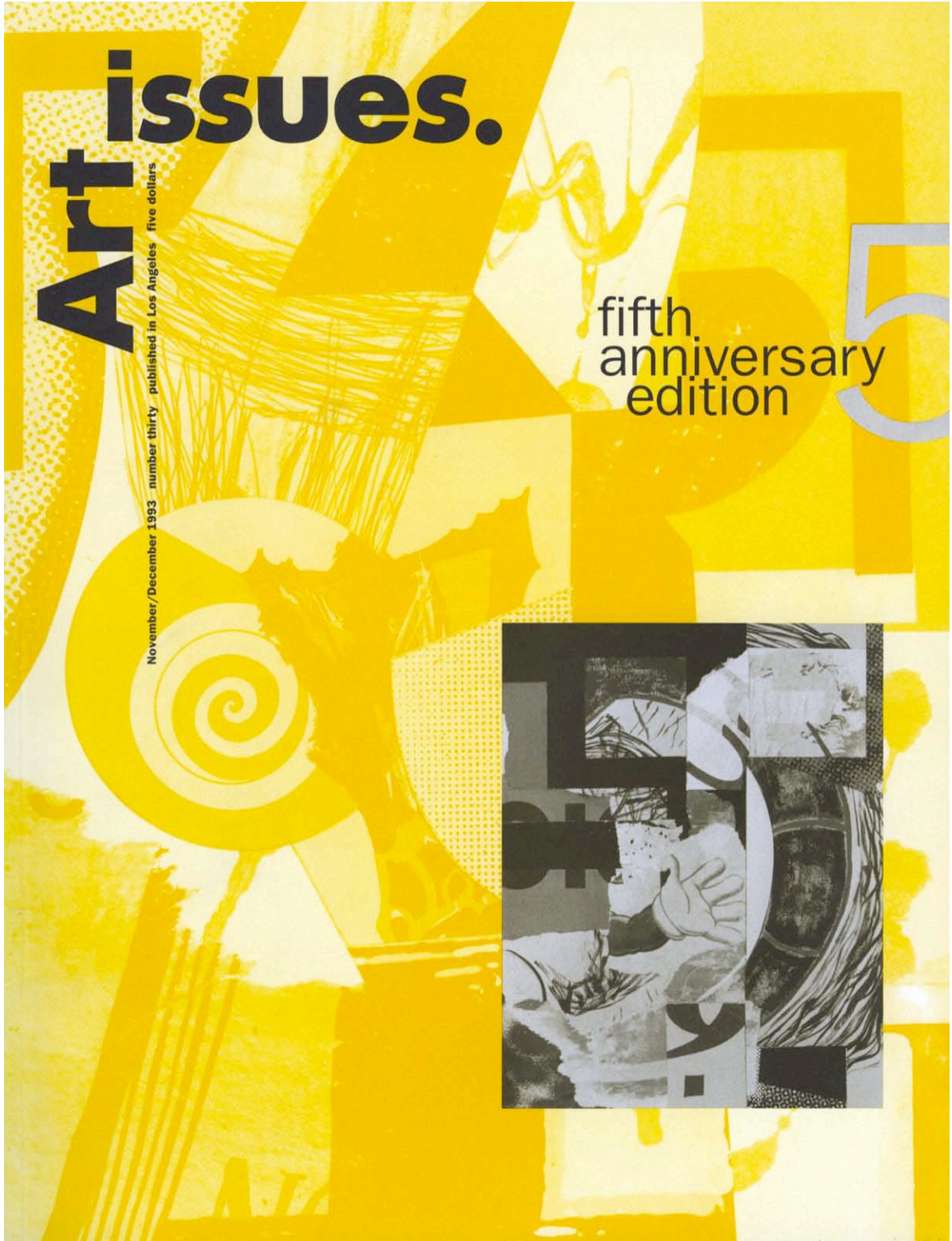


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Dave Hickey

LITTLE VICTORIES: ROY DOWELL'S COLLAGES

Roy Dowell's new collages are the children of external procedure. Each one is exactly 9 inches high by 6-7/8 inches wide. Each took a single day to complete, and each was generated, I suspect, from a single batch of billboard and poster material. In any case, they were all executed between August 1991 and August 1992. So the thirty-six collages, recently exhibited at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, average out at about one every ten days. Beyond these procedural parameters, however, civility, modesty, and regularity are altogether absent from the work. Considered together, Dowell's images speak less of an ordered aesthetic than of an improvisatory way of living, a life dedicated to shredding the elephantine, machine-tooled banality of Public America—and to reassembling these tatters quickly, on a day-to-day basis and under maximum stress, into a new and more restlessly congenial landscape.

Dowell's procedure, of course, recalls Rosenquist's in the way that very large patterns and images are excerpted and reconstituted in smaller and more complicated compositions which resonate beyond their frames, where, by implication, the excerpted shapes complete themselves in layered complexity, in a new social order. Dowell's images, however, eschew the earnest grandiosity of Rosenquist's. They are poised rather than composed, balanced and counterbalanced, and free of any aspiration to strenuous formality. Thus, in their intimacy and proliferation, they seem less the product of the agenda that created them than a byproduct of its performance. They aspire to the status of evidence, I think, declaring that an improvisatory agenda is somewhere in place—and that such a life can be lived.

In this sense, then, the collages might be construed as parables, as Gerhard Richter characterizes his abstractions: "... images of a possible form of social relations [that] bring together, in a living and viable way, the most different and the most contradictory elements in the greatest possible freedom. Not paradise." If we call them parables, however, we need to recognize that Dowell's agenda is less puritanical than Richter's, and not so tragic, because there is, in fact, a kind of utopian equipoise about Dowell's images, however acrobatically achieved. And it is this discreet ebullience, I think, that occasioned my single, *sotto voce* reservation: that they seemed, you know, a little *perfect*—and this after only an hour of wandering around the gallery, distracted by the pleasure of looking at them.

Even this reservation dissolves, however, as you begin to appreciate the ruthlessness with which Dowell achieves his apparent perfection—and realize further that the visual refinement with which these images are imbued has been



Roy Dowell
Untitled #570, 1992
Acrylic and collage on paper
9" x 6-7/8"

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.

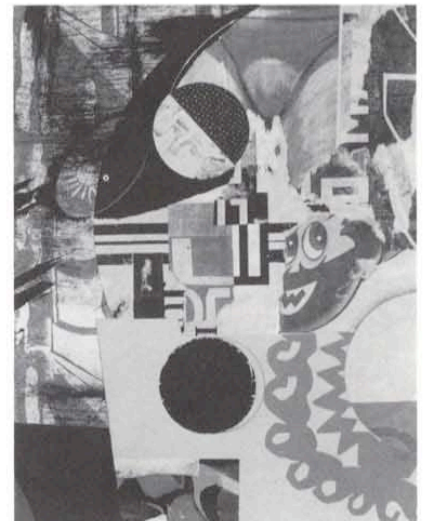
Thus, the raucous interleaving of image and abstraction in these images addresses issues of optical economy and imperceptibility that were once the sole province of pure abstract painting. That seductive visual bounce in and out of signification that characterizes a good Ellsworth Kelly, for instance, 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 collagieur, 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