

limitations of the obdurate picture plane, Moholy-Nagy experimented with the new plastics. His Plexiglas works, fragile and precious, allowed him to combine the ambiguousness of transparency and the presence of shape with the transformation of painted stripes of paint into shadows and the mutation of texture into shaded shapes slanting from the point of origin. Controlled and yet ambiguous, perhaps predicting an uncertain future, Moholy-Nagy's creations shared a light touch with a breathing space full of possibilities.

In contrast to these fragile experiments, his inventive and kinetic "Light Prop for an Electric Stage (Light-Space Modulator)" is surprisingly sturdy and large. Designed for the artist to use to demonstrate plays of light and movement, this beautiful construction is a photogram in three dimensions, as if negative shapes have leaped into being as positives, asserting their materialized presence. A promoter of contemporary photography, the artist rested his "New Vision" photography upon an insistence upon re-seeing the world from new perspectives that renounce old points of view. Moholy-Nagy asserted that the Eiffel Tower should be re-viewed as a sculpture, so he photographed it from the ground, craning upward.

When he left the Bauhaus in 1928, he photographed the Berlin Radio Tower in a series of images from the top down. It would be a mistake to read the oeuvre of this artist as a formalist experimenter, for the artist was a dedicated communist whose "new vision" was a political one. His leftist leanings meant that he was marked as an enemy

of the state in Nazi Germany. Moving quickly from Holland to England and finally to America, László Moholy-Nagy finally found a permanent home where he could reestablish the Bauhaus in Chicago, where he would meet his untimely death from leukemia in 1946.

Jeanne Willette

## DENNIS MUKAI

(Robert Berman Gallery, Santa Monica) A portrait by Dennis Mukai bears the caption "ceci n'est pas Ed," subtitled "Homage to Magritte." One might also add, "ceci n'est pas une photo," even though the meticulous detail makes it look like a stunning, antique sepia photograph of Ed Ruscha. This illusion and quick assumption might be bolstered by fans of Mukai's earlier career as photographer of "the beautiful people." But, for Mukai photography has often been, and still is, a tool, a means to an end.

A class of '79 Art Center College of Design illustration major, Mukai became well-known for his photographs that others turned into subsequent paintings of beautiful women to be featured in *Playboy* and headshots of rock stars. Now, photographs serve as adjunct memory for images that he uses as reference in the intricate painting process that sets him apart. But, more on that later.

In his first show in more than eight years he reveals aspects of his world-view through paintings that



Dennis Mukai, "Poule Mouillée," 2016, sanded acrylic and oil on masonite panel, 30 x 60".

distinguish themselves through their unique texture. He calls it “Abrasive Affirmations.” Abrasive refers to his technique of creating an image by subtracting rather than adding medium and, secondarily, to a work’s inherent message. Affirmation infers appreciation of his Japanese culture (he was born in Hiroshima and raised in Southern California), its sometimes darkly-tinged humor and his mastery of subtle social commentary. The latter sometimes appears in languages other than English. “It’s like the texts on shirts I saw when I was traveling, the words may appear beautiful but, out of context, no one knows what they mean,” he explains.

Here one can infer that he takes his work seriously but not necessarily himself; that nothing is what it seems; and that ultimately, it’s up to viewers to figure it all out. Take for example “Poule Mouillée,” a nighttime view of the Louvre vicinity of Paris. The title translates from French literally as “drenched chicken,” but is vernacular for “a coward.” One might ask how lack of courage applies here, but Mukai explains that at his first moment of perception, the nocturnal view stunned something in him and he found the beauty somewhat scary.

Other images speak for themselves. “Mow and Grown,” may record something as benign as a manual lawnmower but, as Mukai placed it under the light of a darkly clouded sky, it looks like a World War I vintage cannon.

What to make of “Art is Anal” then? It’s a portrait of a somewhat wary looking African-American man wearing a Mickey Mouse hat and Harry Potter glasses. Subtly embedded in the image, is the word “artisanal,” a term overused to the point of banality these days.

The piece the *résistance* here is “Rage,” a triptych depicting a road-side collision and its aftermath. Hazy suggestion of a city street, wet pavement and an ominous sky turning into complete darkness speak of conflicting forces and dire consequence. On a happier note there is “Until the Cow Comes Home,” a faint outline of a couple kissing with the embedded exhortation to “Kiss,” and “It’s

the Sex.”

So, how does Mukai create these paintings? First he takes a custom prepared piece of masonite and coats it with layers of gesso. He adds layers of shades of umber and finally black. Once the surface is dry, he draws desired images in white outlines. And then the real labor of love begins. With a piece of sandpaper rolled into a narrow cone with a pencil-thin tip, he painstakingly rubs away layers of pigment until he achieves the requisite shades/contrast of drama.

Says the artist, “There is not a brush in sight. What I find to be rewarding are things that take time, and then, when I am finally done, it’s WOW.”

Daniella Walsh

## JASON RHOADES

(Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, Downtown) When Jason Rhoades passed away in 2006 at the age of 41 he was at the apex of his short career. During his life he pushed the boundaries of what art could be in his expansive installations. After receiving his MFA at UCLA in 1993, where Rhoades was mentored by noted artists Richard Jackson and Paul McCarthy, he began to show locally, nationally and not too long after that, internationally. He quickly became known as a “bad boy” artist who broke rules, did not follow aesthetic conventions, and demanded complete control over his installations. Rhoades fully embraced the idea of site specificity and immersion. He favored dense, hard to navigate spaces through which viewers were forced to carve their own path. The only current comparison would be the recent installations by Swiss artist Thomas Hirshhorn, who recently exhibited at The Mistake Room.

What distinguished Rhoades from other artists filling rooms with objects was his ability to create order from chaos and to weave a trajectory that produced meaning through the presentation of too much