

ARTS & LETTERS

GALLERY-GOING

Bless This (Well-Composed) Mess



GEORGE ADAMS

By JOHN GOODRICH

Painters have traditionally used unusual points of view to dramatize their subjects. Picture the upward-spiraling clouds in Tiepolo's ceilings, or the low horizon and vast skies of Dutch landscape paintings. Amer Kobaslija gives this approach a new twist, employing an exotic viewpoint for roomfuls of ordinary clutter.

AMER KOBASLIJA
George Adams Gallery

RECENT ACQUISITIONS
Hollis Taggart Gallery

In his eight large panels at George Adams, he depicts in painterly detail the contents of a small, windowless studio. In some, the walls are bare, but most depict numerous paintings hanging or leaning against the walls, along with the usual studio bric-a-brac: a palette, cans of Turpenoid, the remains of a fast-food meal. The tension arises from the wide-angle, overhead view that turns walls into crazily angled planes. In most paintings, a stepladder stretches upward toward our point of view, showing the artist's rather prosaic means of gaining his viewpoint — and making us co-conspirators of sorts in his obsessive pursuit.

Like the paintings of contemporary artists Rackstraw Downes and Jackie Lima, these works probe the nature of our perceptions and conventions for depicting space. How to re-create, in fixed strokes, impressions that are absorbed sequentially by the moving eye?

Mr. Kobaslija's deadpan humor, however, is all his own. The artist appears only once in these panels, as the sandaled foot on the ladder at the bottom edge of "Artist in His Studio" (2006). In other paintings, that ladder's top step hovers tantalizingly close to our eyes — but without his foot, as if he had levitated moments before. In "Con te Partiro" (2006), a camera on a tripod stares upward at us like an inquisitive animal, providing another clue about his process. Almost all of the paintings are diptychs and triptychs, but with the images flowing continuously across the seams, the divisions serve mainly as teasing reminders of the panels' flatness.

The artist's painterly talents are es-

pecially evident in "Artist in His Studio." This 10-foot-wide panel achieves a majestic breadth in its view, sweeping from a busy desk directly beneath our eyes to the open, far end of the room. In all the paintings, the artist conveys the quiet radiance of the unevenly illuminated walls; shrewdly, his brushstrokes align with their steep perspectives, emphasizing the plunge to the floor. He also captures the effect of the paint-

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After these first, bold delineations of space, though, the artist's descriptions become more passive. Some highlights on plastic chairs and suitcases feel pallid. Other colors tend to label objects without giving density to their intervals; background objects in "Con te Partiro" press forward so confusingly that the ladder seems almost a refuge.

The intriguing result is that even as the artist tests the limits of perspective, he doesn't look far beyond its powers. Pictorial depth is an elastic quality; Bonnard's spaces, built of contradictory pressures of color, convince even as they defy perspective. But Mr. Kobaslija avoids this particular dive into the unknown, finding plenty of drama in his eccentric viewpoints.

♦ ♦ ♦

August in the art world is a time of group shows and summer themes. A title like "Recent Acquisitions" prepares one for an especially diffuse gallery-going experience, but Hollis Taggart's installation is notable not only for the quality of its work, but also for its coherence. In keeping with the gallery's emphasis on American Modernism, the work spans more than seven decades of American painting, but a thread of lyrical expressionism connects the more than 40 paintings and works on paper.

James Brooks's large abstraction "Casper" (1973) reflects the crisp, flat shapes of his late acrylic paintings, but



HOLLIS TAGGART

Amer Kobaslija, "Sputnik Sweetheart of New Orleans and the End of the World" (2006), top; Roy Lichtenstein's "Angel Before the Castle" (c. 1950-51), above.

there's nothing cautious about the way his white and black forms churn muscularly before a brilliant orange field. Other abstract canvases by Grace Hartigan and Giorgio Cavallon share a surprisingly similar palette — deep, warm reds and solid yellows among blacks and whites — but while Mr. Cavallon's colors meditatively shift around his untitled 1986 canvas, Ms. Hartigan's forms fiercely coil and twist, practically brimming from "Months and Moons" (1950).

Across the gallery, "The Bar" (1951), an abstracted interior scene by Hans Hofmann, becomes a one-man laboratory for testing color, texture, and gesture. Gallery-goers accustomed to Alfred Maurer's attenuated Cubist heads may be startled by his "Still Life With Bougainvillea" (c. 1909-11); this small panel delights with its Matisse-like quickness of color and timely punches of viridian green and scarlet.

Even more surprising is the early Roy Lichtenstein, "Angel Before the Castle" (c. 1950-51). Inspired by the Bayeux Tapestry, this canvas depicts a cubistic figure floating among tower-like forms. Fragmented yellows — variously

limpid, dense, and retiring — circle jauntily on a rust-red field with a still life (c. 1935-36), and Bob Thompson's homage to Giorgione, "The Pest" (1965), in which the figure spite their jazzy colors, remain tightly faithful to those of the original.

Other notable works include Arshile Gorky's tiny untitled Cubist drawing of green-gray and brilliant red. Its rhythms recall the lyricism of Braque rather than the static stylization of Pop.

Arnold Friedman from Hollis Taggart, previous exhibition touch on several strains of Modernism; while rare from the Impressionistic to the gantly geometric, all have a distinctly American way of embracing both earthbound and the transcendent.

Kobaslija until August 18 (525 W. St., between Tenth and Eleventh ave, 212-564-8480). Price range: Galleries tend to disclose prices.
"Recent Acquisitions" until Sept. 8 (958 Madison Ave., between 75th and 76th streets, 212-628-4000). Price range: \$18,000-\$325,000.