

One advantage of the camera obscura is that it can be almost any size. Vera Lutter and Shi Guorui both expose enormous sheets of paper for long periods to make giant negative images. Lutter built her camera obscura inside the former Pepsi-Cola bottling plant in Long Island City, New York, and then made a ten-day exposure. The result is a 14-foot-long, three-panel photograph of the crumbling industrial space. Guorui's beautiful *Shanghai (Detail of Left)*, 2005, a 12-foot-plus panorama, shows the surreal architecture of the city in delicate shades of gray. To make it, the artist turned a room of Shanghai's Grand Bay View Hotel into a camera obscura. Abelardo Morell also made witty use of a hotel room, this one in New York City. He converted it into a camera obscura, and then, with a conventional camera, photographed the



Abelardo Morell, *Camera Obscura Image of Brooklyn Bridge in Bedroom*, 1999, gelatin silver print, 30" x 40". Alan Klotz.

upside-down image of the Chrysler Building splashed across the room's walls and bed.

Other artists in the show took a less straightforward approach. Particularly charming were the works of Rebecca Cummins, whose sculptural pieces included a window in the gallery stacked full of wine glasses with the curved Chelsea skyline visible in each, and a hollowed-out 1944 Webster's dictionary, in which she installed a lens and ground glass, turning it into *Libra Obscura* (2002).

By the late 19th century, the invention of cameras and film had made the camera obscura obsolete. Though the technique may be little used today, this exhibition amply demonstrated that it remains an intriguing tool for artists.

—Rebecca Robertson

## James Valerio

George Adams

In his tenth one-man show at this gallery, Chicago artist James Valerio presented three beautiful large-scale paintings and four equally exquisite pencil drawings. Though best known for his large-scale figurative and still-life paintings based on photographs, Valerio is not a traditional photorealist. He is far more interested in the edges of reality, where the facts don't quite add up.

This brings mystery even to seemingly straightforward paintings like the evocative *Pruning* (2005), which shows two men balanced on ladders, carefully cutting dead branches from a mass of trees.

Here, Valerio captures the subtle interplay between them as they labor over a difficult task amid gloriously luminous foliage. Equally engrossing is the eccentric *August Rose* (2004), which shows a woman standing in a small blue wading pool, a pink inner tube around her waist. The artist gives no hint as to why she is there, in a garden, in a pool meant for children, but her stance is so matter-of-fact that her presence

makes sense in the same way as it would in a dream.

Valerio draws with the same attention to detail that he gives his paintings. In the portraits here, each line in his subjects' faces, the tilt of their heads, and their expressions speak volumes about their responses to life. As in Valerio's paintings, what is implied is as important as what is shown.

—Valerie Gladstone

## Mary McDonnell

James Graham & Sons

In these 12 wonderfully atmospheric abstract paintings, Mary McDonnell conveyed the many moods of the day: sun-washed at dawn, in the yellow-streaked *Chasing the Cuckoo* (2004–5); tinged with blue shadows later in the morning, in *Blue Headed Friend* (2004–5); drained of



James Valerio, *Pruning*, 2005, oil on canvas, 84 1/4" x 96 1/4". George Adams.

color by gathering darkness, in the gray-shaded *Daylight Hours 9.34 (Johnny)*, 2005. As dreamy as Monet landscapes, these nearly monochromatic works appear lit from within and are remarkably evocative despite their simplicity.

To achieve her effects, McDonnell pours paint onto a wood panel and then pulls the color across the surface, scraping off the excess. Adding and subtracting in this fashion, she builds up many thin layers of paint, producing scrimms of color punctuated by incidental marks made by irregularities in the wood grain or by her tools.

These mysterious marks give the



Mary McDonnell, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on wood, 30" x 22". James Graham & Sons.

works the look of coded messages. The crisscrossing lines in *Go Around One, Two* (2004–5) might be a description of a sunset or a bonfire, and the blue-green striations in *Ukelele Serenade* (2002) the notations for a passage of music.

—Valerie Gladstone