

office staff of six smiling white men, two smiling white women, and one unsmiling black man in #22: *Field Work*). The third panel in each triptych features the photograph of a child who turns out to be Anita Hill, her uncertain grin overlaid with text that moves from disclaimer (IT'S FINE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN) through accusation (YOU TAKE EVERYTHING TOO PERSONALLY) to menace (YOU'RE DEAD MEAT). This "you" is unequivocally a victim. Which "you" is it, though? The chained corpse—or the mirthless middle manager? Cute Hill with her pigtailed—or grown-up Hill, who springs immediately to mind if (and only if) a viewer learns who the child is? Maybe the gallerygoer, who hears the increasingly hysterical text in her mind as she reads? Or the artist who wrote that text? Mutatis mutandis, who does the speaker become? "You" and "I" are also "mythic beings," ciphers in the volatile yet rigid mythos of race.

—Frances Richard

Rebecca Morris

HARRIS LIEBERMAN

"Abstraction never left, motherfuckers." Los Angeles painter Rebecca Morris adopts a confrontational tone in her 2006 text *Manifesto (For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non-Objective)*, but viewers less intimately invested in the rise and fall and rise of her chosen mode may wonder at the necessity of such combative sloganeering. It may be true that when Morris graduated from art school back in the mid-1990s, other practices were in the spotlight, but is there still a need to bolster work of this kind with a pose of such clubbish toughness? Perhaps I'm taking her apparent indignation the wrong way; when paintings

are marked by the kind of joie de vivre that is evident here, even a seeming insult can turn out to be something closer to an expression of glee.

In five large canvases, Morris ranges across a broad landscape of forms and finishes, exploring a painterly logic that essayist Anthony Elms (espousing what he confesses is a "crackpot theory") compares to that of the run-on sentence. Aiming to exploit the potential of a consciously disjointed material grammar, Morris layers metallic enamel over dry, scumbled oil, and places what might seem the most unassuming of pictorial elements center stage. In the lively *Untitled (#10-09)*, 2009, for example, a diverse group of forms is sprinkled across an expanse of pure white, with even

the gentlest—a delicately brushed patch of gray-brown top right; a scattered constellation of blue-green speckles bottom left—given ample breathing room.

While *Untitled (#10-09)* and *Untitled (#06-10)*, 2010—which occupied the gallery's rear space—both convey an easygoing feeling of lightness and space, others of Morris's pictures, by contrast, trade in density. *Untitled (#07-10)*, 2010, is a jigsaw puzzle–like surface of interlocking shapes, each with its own mix of pattern and coloration. Thus a rough grid of moss green on white abuts a rose-pink

circle spattered with magenta, which is itself overlapped by a square of pallid blue-gray. And so it goes on, every shape cut across by another, every color inflected by its neighboring hue. Morris's application here is soft, slightly fuzzy, closer to staining than painting, hardly the "rumbling and forceful gathering" described in Elm's text, but striking nonetheless.

In *Untitled (#01-10)*, 2010, and *Untitled (#09-09)*, 2009, Morris brews a richer blend, applying metallic spray paint atop her customary oils, producing the effect of a kind of armor plating. In the newer canvas, this faux-precious finish adopts the form of a banded, irregular, straight-sided field that neatly skirts various forms—a fractured green and peach chevron here; a red-veined, purple-edged circle there—and is bounded by a foundation of white brushed casually with gray. In the earlier work, it runs edge to edge, allowing a mottled ground—actually a drop cloth salvaged from the artist's studio floor—to penetrate in the form of a scatter of geometric shapes. In both panels, the sprayed surface is wrinkled and pockmarked, seeming at times about to separate itself from its support.

In these two works in particular, Morris makes good on the fist-pumping bravado of *Manifesto*, forcing the technically fractious or even seemingly incompatible into precarious alliance. Exercising a loose-limbed style that evokes a cadre of her seniors (Mary Heilmann, Jonathan Lasker, and Fiona Rae among them) but also boasts its own peculiar and elusive appeal, Morris succeeds in avoiding cliché and hints—strongly—at her genre's rude health.

—Michael Wilson

Betye Saar

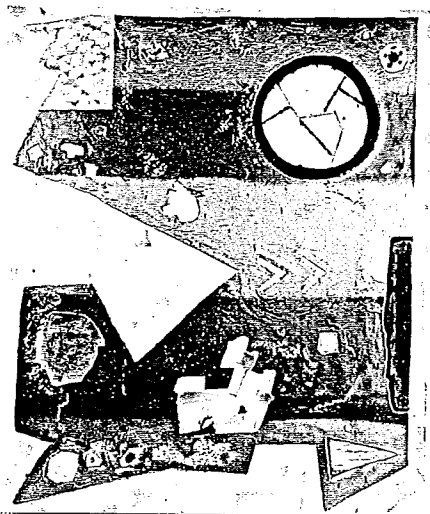
MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY

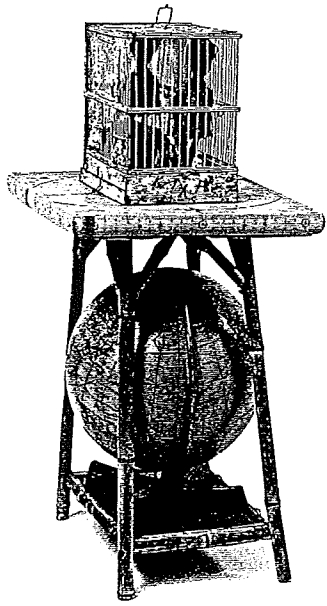
On certain antebellum plantations in the American South, behind the magnolias and the majestic colonnaded verandas, is a covered walkway connecting the kitchen (kept far from other buildings for fear of fire) and the Big House. It is called the "whistle walk," not for any leisurely strolls or romantic serenades that took place there, but for the prosaic reason that slaves were required to whistle as they carried platters of food to the tables of their masters, to assure they were not eating anything along the way.

This and other perversities of human bondage may explain why the metaphor of the caged bird singing is a fraught one in the context of Betye Saar's oeuvre, which has for the past forty years deployed eclectic objects to return viewers to racially charged events in its appraisal of African-American history. In the twenty-one recent assemblages and some half dozen collages in "Cage," an exhibition of new work, Saar focuses intently on birdcages and avian imagery, and on old-fashioned cooking implements, to speak again to the lives of African Americans during and after that "peculiar institution" of slavery.

Saar's exhibition intertwines these sources differently depending on the medium. On the one hand, her sculptures combine elaborately wrought cages she rummaged for in junk shops and yard sales with the sort of stereotyping mammy, Sambo, pickaninny, blackface, and black porter collectibles that have been a mainstay of Saar's iconography since the early 1970s and that one can, disturbingly, still find for purchase today. Sometimes hanging and sometimes placed on antique furniture, the birdcages make uncannily appropriate homes for the figurines due to their current and former tenants' diminutive scales, and owing also to the symbolic connotation of domestic labor as captivity that these cages as dioramas convey when Saar commingles them with old washboards, sieves, and frying pans. Her collages, on the other hand, frequently juxtapose photographic portraits of

Rebecca Morris, *Untitled (#01-10)*, 2010, oil and spray paint on canvas, 84 x 72".





Betye Saar, *Globe Trotter*, 2007, mixed media, 32 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 14 1/2".

plaintive-looking black toy soldier whose facial features have been worn down to an eerily blank mask. Rimming the tabletop is a length of measuring tape, evoking the rise in the nineteenth century of statistical metrics justifying racial privilege, the vastness of the distance between Africa and the New World, and the smallness of the quarters in which the childlike doll is confined. In the collage *Nevermore*, 2010, a woman's diaphanous ankle-length gown is outfitted with a pair of birds perched on the shoulders like ears. Superimposed on the dress is a diagram of hellishly crowded billeting on a slave ship, demonstrating how to most efficiently transport chattel on a transatlantic voyage. Of course the title references Poe's poem "The Raven," whose ebony bird repeatedly intoned the word to memorable and frightening effect. Here, the implied repetition acts like a quickening pulse, revivifying the ghostly, avenging giantess whose torso is filled with an armature of hundreds of suffering human bodies stacked like pins on a cribbage board.

—Eva Díaz

Julie Evans and Ajay Sharma

JULIE SAUL GALLERY

The title of this exhibition, "Cowardust," comes from the Hindi word *godhūli*, or "cowdust hour," a term for the indistinct twilight hour between day and night when the herds return from pasture and a fine dust rises up from the road. This liminal time, characterized by flickering landscapes and blurring views, epitomizes the cross-cultural exchange central to the collaboration between Julie Evans and Ajay Sharma. It also describes the paintings themselves, resting as they do on the boundary between dreaming and wakefulness. The images blend the traditional and the contemporary, straddling eras and cultures.

Evans and Sharma met in Jaipur in 2003, while Evans was in India on a Fulbright scholarship studying miniature painting; the two have been collaborating artistically since 2009, creating exquisite works on

nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African-American women with detailed period renderings of birds and plant specimens. In these delicate two-dimensional works, the figures, often facing the camera in dignified poses and formal attire, are embellished with delicate filigrees of patterned flora and fauna moving in and around their hair and bodies.

The impact of Saar's work is heightened by her titles' painfully raw puns, which often refer to the continuing effects of the incarceration of blacks in the United States and elsewhere, from the journey of the Middle Passage, which brought captured Africans to enslavement in the colonies, to the criminal justice system of today, which sees an alarming percentage of the young black population of the US housed in correctional facilities. In the sculpture *Globe Trotter*, 2007, Saar rests a modest square cage on a simple rough-hewn bamboo side table, under which a large classroom globe is wedged. Inside the cage stands a

paper that combine their individual techniques and artistic cultures—miniature painting for Sharma, primarily abstract painting for Evans. The eight works on view here—rendered in, among other materials, acrylic, gouache, and pencil—hover on the indefinite edge between abstraction and ornamentation, depicting minute iconographic forms on bulbous backgrounds of fluid and frayed color. *GreenMisstep* (all works 2010), for instance, delineates cloudy sky in the upper portion of a dark green oval with blurred edges; at the lower right of the oval, a sitting deck and little red women's slippers suggest human presence, while a configuration of small circles in the foreground lends the composition the rhythm of a nocturnal raga for hidden lovers.

The works include multiple references to Indian culture, as well as to the country's ecology. Peacocks, herons, tigers, and lotus flowers—fleeting elements of representation—insinuate themselves into compositions that remain predominantly nonnarrative, while small phallic and vaginal details suggest sensuality. In *DragonSprout*, a pyrotechnic fountain of rosy bubbles gushes forth from a central umbilicus, perhaps representing the central moment of creation of the world in the Hindu cosmogony, a burst of pure energy here embraced by delicate blue-green leaves. The artists allude to Hindu deities again in *CowDustHour*: Floating weightlessly in midair, Ananta Shesha, the five-headed serpent, represents the presence of Vishnu; Krishna's strings of pearls hang against ethereal dark bubbles; and a sacred cow stands placidly above a pink cloud. Although small-scale, these paintings evoke both microcosm and macrocosm, terrestrial landscapes and celestial maps, in a timeless poetic and spiritual synthesis.

Other Western artists have used artists and artisans from south Asia to execute their works (Alighiero Boetti and Luigi Ontani, for example), but those assistants were mere executors whose identities remained anonymous. Evans and Sharma, by contrast, devise a collaboration marked by parity. To render these detailed dreamscapes, both artists intervened numerous times, erasing or modifying the work already done, inserting new details, or making small adjustments to elaborate on the themes or celebrate the work of the other. It is as if the ego of each were dissolved, their individual personalities fused to the point of becoming almost indistinguishable. In this sense, the collaboration represents an unusual experiment: It highlights the potential for real transcultural exchange between East and West, while stimulating a reflection on diversity (social, sexual, and religious) and on dichotomies (female/male, chaos/order, abstraction/representation) in paintings suffused with poetry and grace.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

John Gerrard

SIMON PRESTON GALLERY

John Gerrard's *Cuban School (Community Stb of October) 2010* is a projection of a slow pan around a very large building that is whitish, filthy, and decaying, with two long parallel rectangular structures and

Julie Evans and Ajay Sharma, *GreenMisstep*, 2010, acrylic, gouache, colored pencil, mineral, and lac pigments on paper, 14 x 11".

