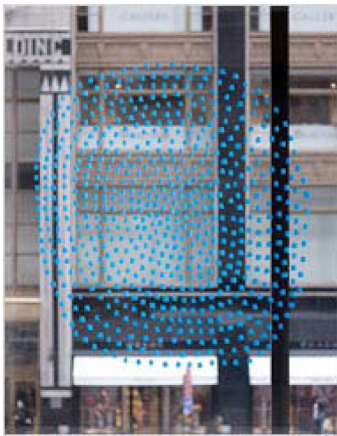


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Dear Gallery: It Was Fun, but I'm Moving Up

By ROBERTA SMITH



Tony Feher's dots of tape on a window at Pace's gallery on 57th Street.

PaceWildenstein and D'Amelio Terras, New York

An overheated art market sets all kinds of things in motion. Big galleries with money to burn and multiple spaces to fill start circling smaller galleries, eyeing their most successful artists like the underdeveloped properties they sometimes are. Artists get itchy and think about moving up the gallery food chain. And boom or bust, even the friendliest, most mutually beneficial artist-dealer relationships can prove finite. They are outgrown or become stale. Suddenly, it's time to move on.

To interested onlookers, such parting of ways can be as unsettling as the sundering of a marriage of old friends. First you hear that the artist has left one gallery for another, or just left with no place to go, although new attachments often pop up suddenly. The news may come like a bolt from the blue or after months of rumors, courtship and offers that can't be refused. The change may seem insane, or make perfect sense. The word sellout, however quaint these days, may be bruited about.

Some months later you receive the announcement for the artist's first show under, well, new management, in a grander setting, with more lavish trimmings — perhaps a catalog and a pricier price list.

That announcement is like an invitation to a second wedding. It's official; get used to it. Lots of people — the spurned dealer, other artists, longtime intimates or admirers — look on with mixed

feelings while quietly parsing the event down to the last detail. They may wonder how “the work” looks in “the space”; what degree of rebranding (for artist and dealer alike) is involved; and who is or is not on the guest list for the post-opening dinner.

This kind of show could be called the starting-over debut. Right now there are four notable new matches to be seen, ranging from grandiose to discreet.

Piotr Uklanski

After about a decade with the cutting-edge Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, the Polish-born artist Piotr Uklanski is one of several artists to end up recently (surprise!) at Gagosian. The gallery has lately lured John Currin from Andrea Rosen; Mike Kelley from Metro Pictures; Tom Friedman from Feature; Takashi Murakami from Marianne Boesky; and Anselm Reyle, also from Mr. Brown. Mr. Uklanski, 39, a late-Conceptualist maverick doesn’t quite fit the mold: he lacks a consistent product, but maybe he intends to step things up. That’s the point of starting over; it often signals a new set of ambitions and values. His better-known works include his disco floor for Passerby, Mr. Brown’s bar, which closed last month, on West 15th Street; “The Nazis,” a series of photographs (later published as a book) of often well-known actors playing soldiers of the Third Reich; and “Summer Love,” a Polish deconstruction of a spaghetti western.

His starting-over debut is a blowout that takes full advantage of Gogo’s big bucks and cavernous spaces. Given Mr. Uklanski’s wily combination of seriousness and black humor, sincerity and cynicism, it also spoofs the starting-over form, as well as the often nationalistic hollowness of festival art. The show’s title, “Bialo-Czerwona,” or “White-Red” (a colloquialism for the Polish flag, like “red, white and blue” in this country) is announced in huge white Styrofoam letters hanging on a vast expanse of red velvet curtains, evoking both old movie theaters and apparatchik pomp.

In a labyrinth of rooms the works move through the Communist, Roman Catholic and Modernist faiths: an immense eagle, also in Styrofoam; radiant clusters of foil-and-cardboard Christmas crèches traditional to Poland; and an abstract flag in huge sheets of glass reverse-painted red and white.

Political struggle is commemorated in two photographs of the Solidarity logo spelled out on the docks at Gdansk by masses of men wearing white or red. In the final gallery a massive Solidarity fist in steel is surrounded by six impossibly shiny abstract paintings made of big, luscious pours of red and white resin. Morris Louis abstractions come to mind, but so does dripping blood, especially since these paintings are subtitled “Warsaw Uprising ’44.” Mr. Uklanski’s show announces his intention to be a player while also skewering the game, a kind of anti-Jeff Koons operating on a Koonsian scale. The final oddity is that Mr. Brown, the artist’s former dealer and a maverick in his own right, has written an affectionate but cautionary essay for the catalog.

Alexander Ross

The changeover is quieter and more organic for the abstract painter Alexander Ross, 47, who began his career at Feature (five shows between 1998 and 2005). Still, his starting-over debut is a double deal: a beautiful show of his green-on-green-on-blue cellularly inclined drawings at David Nolan in SoHo and strong, if transitional show of paintings and collages at Marianne Boesky in

Chelsea. (Proving that these things work both ways, Ms. Boesky recently lost Lisa Yuskavage to David Zwirner and Takashi Murakami to Gagosian.)

Mr. Ross's very subject is the organic. For years he has painted semiabstract plant forms, often working from models made of green clay. Paint handling that ranges from quietly expressionistic to topographic mapping eggs on the tensions between microscopic and monstrous; abstract and real; emotional and scientific. At Boesky, Mr. Ross takes new liberties with his work, making uncustomarily hairy collage-drawings from photographs of his clay models, and broadening his palette. The new colors include black, violet and especially a stark, electric orange that opens up and flattens strange interstices between the green blobs. There is often a Gummy Bear translucency, and the forms stretch into landscapes and stack into soft-edged space-age turrets. The subtext of Mr. Ross's show: Change is good.

Tony Feher

Like Gagosian, PaceWildenstein has the deep pockets and gallery acreage to absorb new artists almost effortlessly. This month it has gone public with two additions to its roster, which currently lists 51 artists. One is the sculptor Tony Feher, an ingenious converter of ordinary detritus who has exhibited with D'Amelio Terras since 1997. (According to both galleries they will share Mr. Feher, as a small show of his work at D'Amelio Terras affirms.)

Mr. Feher's 31 often scrappy little sculptures look surprisingly at home uptown in the Pace gallery's flagship space. Their formal economy, humor and wisdom echo the work of Pace familiars like Saul Steinberg, Joseph Cornell and Alexander Calder.

Mr. Feher, 52, is a poet but also an engineer of the everyday whose materials include marbles, plastic bags and straws, bottles and jars of all description, coat hangers and chair legs. Each work is a magic trick whose ultimate charm is its transparency: you see the visual beauty, then the specific genius of the structure and the natural laws exploited. One untitled work is simply an oval of little pieces of blue tape applied directly on the gallery's window.

“(Yellow in French)” is a mobile made of wire hangers hooked together and bent slightly so that each grasps by the neck a clear plastic soda bottle half-filled with yellow liquid. The liquid defines absolute level amid the erratic lines and angles of the hangers and bottles; it also catches the light. Nearby “(Victoria),” a bedraggled loop of low wire garden fencing is decorated with a single bright red Veterans Day poppy. A soldier's grave, and the sadness it brought, is lightly and deftly but irrevocably conjured. Quietly, yet constantly questioning the nature of beauty and nature of art, Mr. Feher's work casts its own spell, even as it makes you believe that you, too, might be able to think and fiddle similar castoffs into something equally delightful. Whether you could show and possibly sell it at Pace is another question.

Thomas Nozkowski

The other Pace newcomer is an old hand: the abstract painter Thomas Nozkowski, 64, who showed at Max Protetch from 1990 to 2006. (No sharing here; there is not a whiff of Mr. Nozkowski on the Protetch Web site.) If a little too plentiful, Mr. Nozkowski's paintings at Pace attest to the durability of his particular brand of abstraction — small, inventive, colorful in all sorts of unexpected ways. His achievement lies in erasing the division between geometric and organic form that was one of the bugaboos of early Modernism and then melding them with more than a hint of cartooning into a signature style unburdened by a signature motif.

Each painting feels like a new adventure in shape, space, color and suggested meaning, and a continual joke on Modernist seriousness that is also serious, most of all in its visual richness and telling surface variations. Constructivism is leavened with suggestions of children's blocks or worn Persian textile. A grid of colored squares waves like a flag. A mountain shape is unnaturally striped in bold blue red. A series of vivid black and red ellipses are extended into a pale pinkish shape that suggests a tree trunk with sawed-off limbs. Mr. Nozkowski has come a longer way than most artists to what some would term the art-gallery big time. Some of his earliest shows, starting in 1979, were at 55 Mercer, the artists-run cooperative that recently ended its 39-year-run in SoHo this year. If PaceWildenstein made him an offer he couldn't refuse, it was also one he richly deserves.