



Sarah McCoubrey, *Untitled Cow #1, 1998*, oil on board, 16" x 15" (photo courtesy of Locks Gallery).

## PHILADELPHIA

Two overlapping exhibitions at Locks Gallery present strikingly different aesthetic approaches and demonstrate the degree of artistic latitude available at the close of the 20th century. Both shows in this quirky pairing—**Richard Artschwager's** "Crates & Installation" (May 21–June 30), and **Sarah McCoubrey's** "Drawings and Paintings" (June 4–July 16)—present competent, intelligent, high-quality work, but it is the juxtaposition of the artists' radically different philosophies that adds an unexpected spark to the experience.

Now in his mid-70s, Richard Artschwager has been an undisputed player in the artworld of the last 40 years. Originally trained as a cabinet-maker, he has long combined elements of Pop with heavy doses of minimalism and conceptualism to create a highly personal yet widely regarded aesthetic. On the most fundamental level, Artschwager's pieces pose questions about the limits and boundaries of art and the qualities that distinguish "fine art" from other object categories.

Installed on the gallery's second floor, Artschwager's show includes three paintings on Celotex (two from the '60s and one from 1974); an elaborate chair constructed from oak, Formica, steel and cow hide; and three sculptural pieces (two based on punctuation symbols, the third, a small corner piece made from rubberized horse hair). However, the core of Artschwager's exhibition is a collection of 11 wooden crates that continue a line of inquiry he has pursued since the early-'90s.

Artschwager's unpainted crates are constructed using familiar crate-building materials and techniques: construction grade lumber of various dimensions (2" x 4"–2" x 10") fastened to 3/8" plywood with countersunk woodscrews, finish washers, and pneumatically installed nails. Craft is not the object here; many butt joints show small hair-line gaps, some end-cuts are not absolutely square, wood filler and putty have not been used. Obviously, the intention is not to build crates to fine-furniture specifications; instead, Artschwager's crates are built to standards not unlike those found in similar commercially fabricated containers.

Artschwager's crates imply utility with a slightly less-obvious subtext of concealment and mystery. Only two works—*Crate (RA-5)* and *Crate (RA-*

*6)*—resemble standard, rectangular, box-like crates. Others call to mind familiar objects: *Crate (RA-28)* looks like a simple house with gable ends; *Crate (RA-14)* also suggests an architectural form—almost like a model for a bifurcated sky-scraper; *Crate (RA-26)* could easily contain a china hutch; *Crate (RA-12)* has the general shape of a bed with head and foot boards. The remainder of the crates—combinations of simple geometric forms—resist easy identification by only vaguely hinting at antecedents in everyday life. The most humorous piece in the group is *Crate (RA-23)*, a smallish work mounted well above eye level on an inward projecting gallery corner. The piece confirms that containment is simply a metaphor; the real content of Artschwager's crates is conjecture and speculation.

Interestingly, the two "ordinary" box-like crates are arranged in the gallery flush against the wall, implying that their unseen backsides are equivalent to their exposed fronts. All other crates in the show are positioned so that they can be viewed in the round, calling to mind some of sculptor Tony Smith's ideas about repetition and predictability—an association that serves as a reminder of Artschwager's position in the development of minimalism.

In stark contrast to Artschwager's living history, Sarah McCoubrey's work is informed by more distant notions. Originally from Philadelphia, now a professor at the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University (New York), McCoubrey lacks Artschwager's artworld status; nevertheless, her work offers a strong counterpoint to his more doctrinaire stance.

Installed on the gallery's first floor, McCoubrey's show includes six charcoal and gesso drawings on gessoed paper and 15 oil on wood panel paintings depicting carefully rendered, highly illusionistic landscapes. Through the use of oil glazing techniques, McCoubrey is able to make pictures that have a stunning luminosity rarely found in painting today. Contemporary clues in the images aside, her pieces could easily be from an earlier time in the history of art when painting bore the burden of representation and dutifully served as a window on the world.

McCoubrey uses other historic devices as well: her foregrounds are crisp and clear (only close inspection can break the illusion, revealing an almost impressionistic cacophony of strokes and marks); her midgrounds gently fade into gauzy, atmospheric backgrounds that help anchor and hold her carefully crafted illusions. However, a few of her decisions seem calculated to stir other readings of her pieces. Most notably, McCoubrey chose to leave the two-inch deep sides of her painted panels primed and unframed; this causes the face of the paintings to noticeably jut forward, asserting the work's objecthood. The effect is enhanced by tiny drips of paint that ooze from the painting's surface almost imperceptibly onto the white gessoed sides, creating a fuzzy edge that subtly insists that these pieces are in fact painted objects—not faithful mirrors of a mechanically copied reality.

Blessed with such awesome technical facility, McCoubrey could easily produce lush idealized landscapes that would resonate with desire for a simpler time when truth was truth and beauty was a primary artistic aim. Instead she has veered away from sure nostalgic success by opting to paint bucolic settings that have been marred and littered with the detritus of contemporary rural life: abandoned agricultural equipment, brush piles, home-made billboards, scraps of wood, naked mounds of dirt, and horizons stitched with utility poles and high-tension wire.

The paintings in the show range from eight by seven inches to 32 by 30 inches, but it is the smaller, more intimate pieces that carry the most power. Among them, *Save White Lake* (1998), features one of those creepy, hand painted, crudely constructed rural billboards sometimes found next to pastures on lonely stretches of highway in the middle of nowhere. It is the kind of sign that generally warns about the wages of sin or the evils of the federal government, but in McCoubrey's painting the red and blue block letters advise:

WWW.PSHRINK.COM/WHITELAKE

Help keep White Lake

FOREVER WILD

Enforce the covenant

White Lake for all! Not one.

The sign refers to the efforts of a citizens group in upstate New York to ensure that land in the White Lake Wilderness area remains public, free from private development. Definitely not the heroic struggle found in epic history painting, but an interesting representation of grassroots communications nonetheless.

McCoubrey's drawings are essentially studies that inform her painting. Each depicts a single object centered on the page in stark formal isolation with only a slight indication of setting. Even the drawings' titles suggest their utilitarian purpose—*Ideas for Landscape: Hayrack*, *Ideas for Landscape: Pile of Sticks*, *Ideas for Landscape: Fencing*, etc. From a technical standpoint, the drawings are inviting and no doubt useful as preparatory studies, but as stand-alone works they lack the incongruity and blister found in her paintings.

It has been a tough hundred years for representational painting: early-century manifestos, photography's ever tightening grip, a procession of isms, and several "death of painting" scares no doubt discouraged a host of would-be practitioners. Fortunately, McCoubrey held her convictions. As a result, her pieces serve as substantial and challenging foils to those who claim that representational art is untenable in an age of electronic reproduction. In many ways, McCoubrey's work seems more challenging and radical than Artschwager's crates. In the cynical artworld, her strategy risks looking dangerously anachronistic (without an appropriate balance of irony) and daringly anti-intellectual. Her pieces seem incredibly vulnerable but oddly compelling as we pulse on toward Y2K.