

art (cont.)

— PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST



Jason Salavon

HAVING GAINED REPUTE FOR DESIGNING his own software processes to produce images that comment on art history and pop culture, Jason Salavon insists that information technology is, for him, “a means to an end,” although he admits to having “weird nerdy fun” manipulating the computer. His overarching end, says Salavon, is to “distill the complexity of life to make it more understandable.”

In his new digital photographic work on exhibit at Tony Wight Gallery, Salavon presents three works, each of which “averages” a number of different portraits by Rembrandt, Velazquez and van Dyck, respectively; that is, mashing them up into composite images in which the subjects come out etherealized into ghost-like figures bathed in incandescent auras. From normal viewing distance, the subjects are effaced, but on close inspection, the outlines of facial features are visible and a bit ghoulish. Salavon says that his intent was to set up a play between the styles of masters who were contemporaries, leaving it to viewers with a “cynical look” to judge that he has eliminated differences, and the more discerning to notice distinctions.

Several years ago, Salavon embarked on a project to catalogue every centerfold from Playboy magazine into single images, one for each decade, as he has done here with the art-historical portraits. In the same body of work he blended seventy-six blowjob scenes, money shots and other pornographia. “Every Playboy Centerfold, the 1980s” recently graced the cover of a new book titled “Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching,” by Kelly Dennis.

Salavon also offers up three digital photographic images of simulated mammal skulls that were generated fully in the computer and represent no creature that has ever walked the earth. As with the composite portraits, the skulls are somewhat monstrous, all of them sporting a fang. Salavon says that he was seized by the conceit of filling in missing branches of the evolutionary tree.

It would seem that Salavon has achieved the very opposite of what he claims to have set out to do; rather than making human experience—what William James called a “blooming and buzzing confusion”—more intelligible, Salavon has compounded the world’s felony by augmenting uncertainty.

The disparity between intent and effect can be explained by Salavon’s creative process. Not the conceptual artist that his technical expertise has led people to believe he is, Salavon proceeds by intuition; he explains that he has flashes of ideas and then develops them as his bodies of work take on cyber-flesh and he reflects on his results and the associations that they suggest. He insists that he is engaged in a multifaceted “exploration,” and his art bears that out.

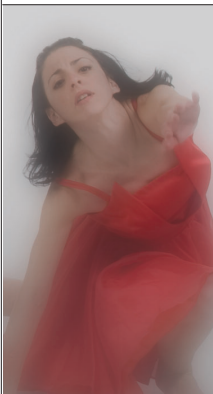
Viewers who attended the opening were most attracted by Salavon’s techniques and his virtuosity in deploying them to create images that provide new visual perspectives, rather than meanings. Todd Hadley praised Salavon for expanding the boundaries of perception and generating new forms of abstraction.

Turning 40, Salavon, who is based in Chicago and has exhibited extensively, has settled into a creative groove that takes him in many different directions, yet has not been distilled into a crystallized meaning. He is fascinated by his intuitions and revels in his techniques, and he lets them lead him where they will. (*Michael Weinstein*)

Jason Salavon shows at Tony Wight Gallery, 845 West Washington, through April 10.

stage

— HEDWIG DANCES GETS PERSONAL ABOUT A BIRTHDAY



The Storytellers

NARRATIVES—WE HUMAN BEINGS eat them up, seek them out, quite frequently imagine them where they don’t exist. They entertain, they educate, they frame our understanding of the world and ourselves. Jan Bartoszek, director of Hedwig Dances, has been thinking a lot about personal narratives during the company’s twenty-fifth anniversary year. Even the title of her new piece—“Dance of Forgotten Steps”—evokes images of myth and legend, like the title of a young-adult fantasy novel.

Bartoszek found inspiration in the personal experiences of Hedwig’s six company members, plus seven additional dancers from the community, who recalled formative moments of their lives on tape for the show.

“The piece is about how important memories form our personal narratives and our identity and, in the subtext, the transitory nature of our lives,” Bartoszek says. “A lot of stories have to do with childhood experiences. My personal remembrances have to do with being out in nature in northern Michigan with my father. Out in the woods...being it looking for mushrooms or just walking around trees and rivers and lakes—those memories are part of my relationship with him and part of who I am.”

Bartoszek collaborated with sculptor Barbara Cooper, who created five simple, fabric-covered set pieces, and video artist Petra Bachmaler, whose reverse-shadow projections douse the black set pieces with white images of moving bodies. Simple black-and-grey costumes by Carol Genetti keep the palate simple, with hints of the arcane—the black-and-white aesthetic of old movies and dream sequences.

Also on the program is a new work for two men by Andrea Miller, entitled “Dust.” Bartoszek commissioned Miller to make a smaller piece for the company; the result is an intimate piece with music by Arvo Part, also on the theme of memory. “The signature movement in the piece begins with the men holding their hands over each other’s eyes and running blindly through the space,” Bartoszek says. “It’s about the relationship and loss of the relationship between the two men. It has a sad beauty.”

The program then shifts tone, concluding with excerpts from Susan Marshall’s carnivalesque “Sawdust Palace Suite,” a character-driven, decadent spectacle of cabaret and aerial artistry. This is the first time Hedwig has performed any aerial work.

“I have an extraordinary group of dancers right now—they are what makes this company so strong,” Bartoszek adds. “I want to give tribute to them, because they make the dances what they are—their ability to execute and perform and believe in the work. That’s my pleasure in twenty-five years—working with extraordinary dancers and collaborators. That’s always been the pleasure, working with people.” (*Sharon Hoyer*)

At the Dance Center of Columbia College, 1306 South Michigan, (312)369-8300. April 1-April 3, 8pm. \$24-28

NEW

- Beauty and the Beast/Broadway In Chicago
- Les Liaisons Dangereuses/Remy Bumppo
- A Life/Northlight
- The Lost Boys of Sudan/Victory Gardens
- Ragtime/Drury Lane Oakbrook
- Street Scene/National Pastime
- Unveiled/Victory Gardens Fresh Squeezed

RECOMMENDED

Selected stage listings and reviews appear below. To submit listings, e-mail stagecal@newcity.com. We do not guarantee that all submitted listings will appear in print. For expanded listings, visit newcitystage.com.

NEW AND NOTEWORTHY SHOWS PLAYS

→ Beauty and the Beast

Theater purists scoff at the notion, but one significant reason for the resurgence of the Broadway musical in recent years has nothing whatsoever to do with the Great White Way itself, but rather, with the resurgence of superb show music in full-length Disney cartoons. Everything about Alan Menken’s score and songs for “Beauty and the Beast” is theatrical in conception, so much so, in fact, that had it appeared on Broadway without having first been a cartoon, it could have done quite well on its own. The fact that it was a cartoon first, however, meant that there isn’t a child in America who grew up with these songs who doesn’t know them inside and out, an unlikely phenomenon if “Beauty and the Beast” had begun life on Broadway. Luckily, the songs are quite good, and children being exposed to them in any way, shape or form will only increase their appetite for good show music in the long run. Thus, taking children familiar to the live version of “Beauty and the Beast” can be viewed as an investment in their theater-going future. No, this is not as elaborate a production as the touring version that came through twelve years ago, but in many ways, what has been scaled back—the behemoth town set, for instance—serves to heighten the basic love story. All of the familiar songs and characters from the film are here, and then some. There are bigger, three-dimensional numbers such as an elaborate “Be Our Guest” Act I climax that is actually more effective than the flat animated version. With more songs and scenes added, the popular fairy tale is fleshed out a bit more, and there are even new songs which fit in remarkably well. When Justin Glaser as the Beast, for instance, longingly sings of his unrequited love for Belle, played by Liz Shvener, a moment which might not have worked in the cartoon is quite effective on stage. The kids may go for candy at such a moment, but parents will love it. And that is why “Beauty and the Beast” as a live musical works so well: it can be appreciated on a variety of different levels. The kids will have plenty of spectacle and special effects, the adults get plenty of romance and pathos. There are even some pretty intense moments here for small children—the first appearance of the Beast sent a handful of toddlers bolting into Moms’ arms—but of course, everything works out well in the end. This is Disney, after all, not Jean Cocteau. (Dennis Polkow) Cadillac Palace Theatre, 151 W. Randolph, (800)775-2000 \$18-\$85. Through April 4.