

HYPERRALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Dirty Hands and Dirty Minds Can Make for Good Art

by John Yau | June 28, 2015



John Ashbery, *The Painter*, 2014, collage, 15 x 20.5 inches

I have known John Ashbery since 1975, which means that either I should excuse myself from writing a review of his collages — especially since I wrote about them in 2008, (*The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2008) when he had his first exhibition at the age of eighty-one – or that I am in the position to know his work (the poems and collages) better than most people, and therefore have a duty to write about them. I will let the reader brood over that muddle, particularly since I don't think what follows even qualifies as a review, which implies a critical distance on the part of the writer.

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

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I do know that I had no intention of writing about the two exhibitions currently at Tibor de Nagy (June 18–July 31, 2015), *John Ashbery & Guy Maddin: Collages* and *Richard Baker: The Doctor is Out*, when I went to the gallery. However, after seeing the serendipitous pairing of Ashbery’s and Maddin’s collages with Baker’s gouaches of paperback book covers, I changed my tune.



Guy Maddin, “Untitled (#29),” 2015, collage on bookcover, 13 1/8 x 9 inches

Like a pun that unexpectedly springs to mind, the pairing would not let me resist saying the obvious: this is a gathering of humbly made works by three individuals who love the vernacular, and who especially prize that moment when a commonplace object — such as a cartoon, movie still, art reproduction, or book cover — can suddenly and swiftly transport you to a heavenly place of the imagination. The key word is “transport,” a derided possibility in an age of very good copies, shiny outsized baubles and “uncreative” writing.

At a time when the art world’s nattering nabobs of positivity seem enthralled with lavish materials, production costs, price tags, auction records and other boorish spectacles, I find it refreshing to see work that requires little more than a pair of scissors, a pot of glue, paint brushes and gouache. As for materials, how about old book covers, used paperbacks, faded postcards, reproductions of famous and not-so-famous works of art, and vintage celebrity photographs — stuff found at flea markets and dusty, secondhand stores.

Made out of printed and painted pieces of paper, this small gem of an exhibition reminds you that you don’t have to rent a huge studio and hire scads of assistants and managers — in other words, be rich — to make art. I remember the late Holly Solomon saying to me, back in the early 1980s, that things began going wrong in the art world when “artists decided they wanted to be like their collectors” — rich people who didn’t make anything, had others do their bidding, and

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Guy Maddin, "Untitled (#07)" 2015, collage and whiteout on bookcover, 9.875 x 7.75 inches

never got their hands dirty, even when they went into the garden. In addition to being a pioneering dealer of the Pattern and Decoration movement, Ms. Solomon seems to have possessed a talent for the oracular.

Ashbery, Maddin and Baker are not averse to getting their hands dirty, to cutting, pasting and painting. They love movies of all kinds, from black-and-white silent films, to the works of Luis Bunuel, Man Ray and Jacques Tati, to early David Lynch and the wonderfully trashy Ed Wood. Add to their love of movies, from the high to the shabby, a love of books of all kinds, alongside cartoons and memorabilia, and you get an idea of their shared passion for the ephemeral. In different ways, each of them has memorialized a fleeting moment, revitalized a forgotten or neglected possibility, and juxtaposed disparate fragments.



John Ashbery, "Desert Flowers" 2014, collage, 9.75 x 14 inches

Here are my short biographical takes on Ashbery, Maddin and Baker (think of them as "program notes"). John Ashbery, who has written fiction, criticism, and plays, is best known for his beguiling poetry, which drives some people to bang their heads against the nearest wall, and others to celebrate their oddness, humor and beauty. He made his first collages while a student at Harvard, inspired in part by the Surrealists, but only started showing them in the last decade.

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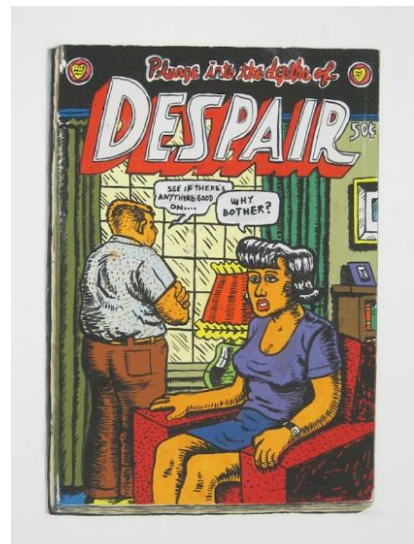
Guy Maddin, who was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, is a filmmaker and installation artist whose debut feature film was *Tales from the Gimli Hospital* (1985-88). According to the film critic J.Hoberman: “Maddin’s most distinctive trait is an uncanny ability to exhume and redeploy forgotten cinematic conventions.” Emma Myers described Maddin’s recent film, *The Forbidden Room* (2015), as “a series of cavernous, roiling story chambers in which viewers can safely enjoy an onslaught of deranged narrative excess without enduring any actual bodily harm.” One of “the story chambers” is Ashbery’s screenplay of a lost Dwain Esper movie, *How To Take a Bath* (1937).

According to the gallery press release:

Ashbery wrote his own adaptation of the long-lost Dwain Esper exploitation film *How to Take a Bath*, which Maddin then filmed. The finished film, a short, is now included in Maddin’s latest feature *The Forbidden Room*, which has been described as “a film treatment in collage”.

Richard Baker is a painter who has expanded beyond painting to make things from whoopee cushions and the cheap, throwaway 3D glasses you get at movies to chocolate bars and marshmallows. Known for his large still-life paintings of incongruent objects, Baker branched out a few years ago and began painting gouaches of actual books, their scuffed and dirty covers.

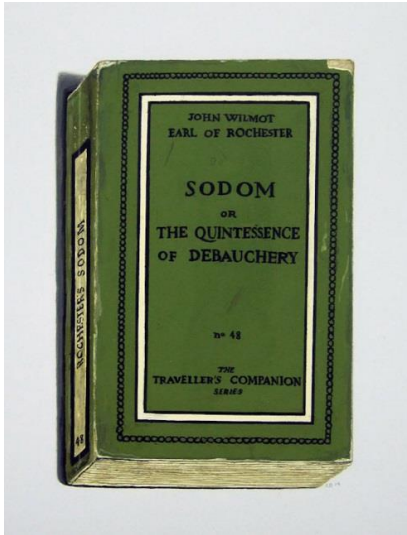
He is married to the terrific poet, Elizabeth Fodaski, and his art can be found on the cover of Robert Polito’s poetry book, *Hollywood and God* (2009).



Richard Baker, “Despair” 2015, mixed media on paper, 12 x 10 inches

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Richard Baker, "Sodom or The Quintessence of Debauchery" 2014, mixed media on board, 12 x 10 inches

Add to this pairing of collages by Ashbery and Maddin the gouaches of book covers by Richard Baker, all of which have to do with psychotherapy — which the artist stretches to include various mental states (“despair), sexual acts (“sodomy”) and literary studies (“Hamlet and Oedipus”) — and you get a wonderful stew, at once modest, unpretentious and wholly satisfying.

At the same time, the collages, especially those by Maddin, can be unsettling (a face cut away), creepy (a behatted monkey sitting alone and forlorn at a table in an empty nightclub), or, in the case of Ashbery, funny and innocently gay (two young men from the 1930s standing by the side of the road in their shorts, hitchhiking). They don't do much to their source (be it a postcard, art reproduction or book cover), but the changes they do make transform it into something unexpected and delightful. There is a good deal humor in these works, a sense of the absurdity of the world and everyday life, all shot through mystery, wonderment and love. Their orchestrations of the disparate are an all too rare delight in this lucre-obsessed world.