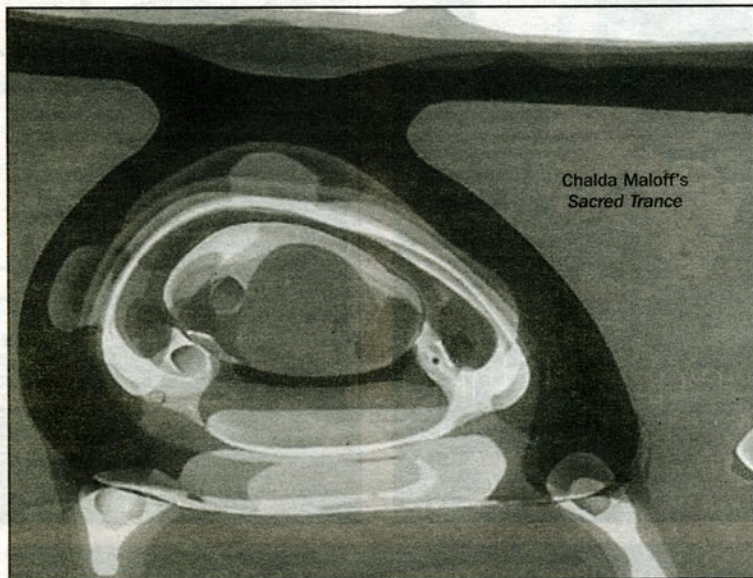


“New American Talent – The 19th Exhibition”

ARTHOUSE AT THE JONES CENTER, THROUGH AUG. 22



Chalda Maloff's
Sacred Trance

This annual showcase is now in its 19th year, and the premise is simple enough. Arthouse, formerly Texas Fine Arts Association, puts out a call to artists across the country to submit materials for a guest juror to peruse before he or she selects a few dozen works for display in this eclectic, free-to-the-public show. This year's juror was Jerry Saltz, senior art critic for *The Village Voice*, whose exhibition ideal is of "full shows, even brimming ones." So this year's "New American Talent" is just that: 85 artists have works on display, and as exhibitions go, this one is absolutely packed with variety, immediacy, and singular artistic visions.

Saltz makes the case in the catalog's introductory essay that New York can no longer be considered the hub of modern artistic endeavors. There has been an explosion of creativity across the country. And as Arthouse generally supports or promotes Texas artists, it comes as no surprise that almost half of the artists on display have Texas connections. Among them is Houstonian Wendy Wagner, whose *Miss Pretty* in oil and acrylic catches the eye with a combination of innocence masking something more profound – an adult consciousness in a child's drawing. In it, a simultaneously glovelike and octopus-ish shape stares with deep, dark, oval eyes past the viewer in a rarified mix of hopeful expectation and hopelessness. Partly sad, partly humorous, the simple, dolled-up shape betrays a mix of deeper emotions.

A.J. Bocchino's *NY Times Headlines (Feb 1, 1993-July 28, 2003)* is exactly that: a digital drawing of headlines strung out in chronological order, colored variously. The work is about 3½ feet tall and more than 7 feet long and is irresistible to anyone with even a passing interest in our nation's journey this past decade. Newspaper headlines swell in direct proportion to the current crisis, and scanning what those crises were, as interpreted by the leading American newspaper of our day, is a lesson in politics, memory, and relativity.

Politics teem in many of the works, as artists are not

content to just render their world without some distinct commentary. There are the overt anti-George Bush messages in the pop art *Bush-Waxed*, by Isabella Natale, and the ur-vacation photo, *War Protest – San Francisco*, by Christopher Stark. There are the more subtle queries, too: of cultural expectation and its cost in Neil Bender's *Attempted Corset*, in which the artist creates a woman's corseted silhouette from a collage of photos of naked limbs; and again in *Gush*, by Aaron Johnson, which calls to mind the flow of blood – upon closer inspection of the rather psychedelic work, though, tiny armored tanks can be spied rolling along the contours of the linen that bulges from the plane of the canvas under all that pigment.

Even more than the political undercurrent of the art, the variety of media used by these artists is staggering. The unexpected reigns. There's tape – duct, strapping, masking – in the (relatively) two-dimensional *Tape Deer*, by Betsy Odum, as well as in the delightful sculpture *Fucking Squirrels*, by Rune Olsen. There's blood as ink in the intricate *Thought Patterns*, by Laura Splan. Or yarn, in April Sullivan's *Tree*. There's cardboard in a variety of forms, including the playful boxes arrayed in the middle of one of the gallery rooms in David Denosowicz's *I Love You*. Then there is *Plateau*, by Sumakshi Singh, a minute acrylic and clay sculpture that literally bursts from the gallery

wall. This hardly scratches the surface of the imaginative and playful discoveries of this group of talented newcomers. Not all the art is groundbreaking – probably none of it is, really – but the energy and originality of vision of these artists, the criteria by which Saltz chose the lot, is evident throughout in works far-fetched and (relatively) easier to access. The exhibit merits a long lingering view, or better still, repeated visits, as patrons can make their own discoveries of new juxtapositions in this abundant collection of new works.

– Robi Polgar



Contrail by Ryan Thompson