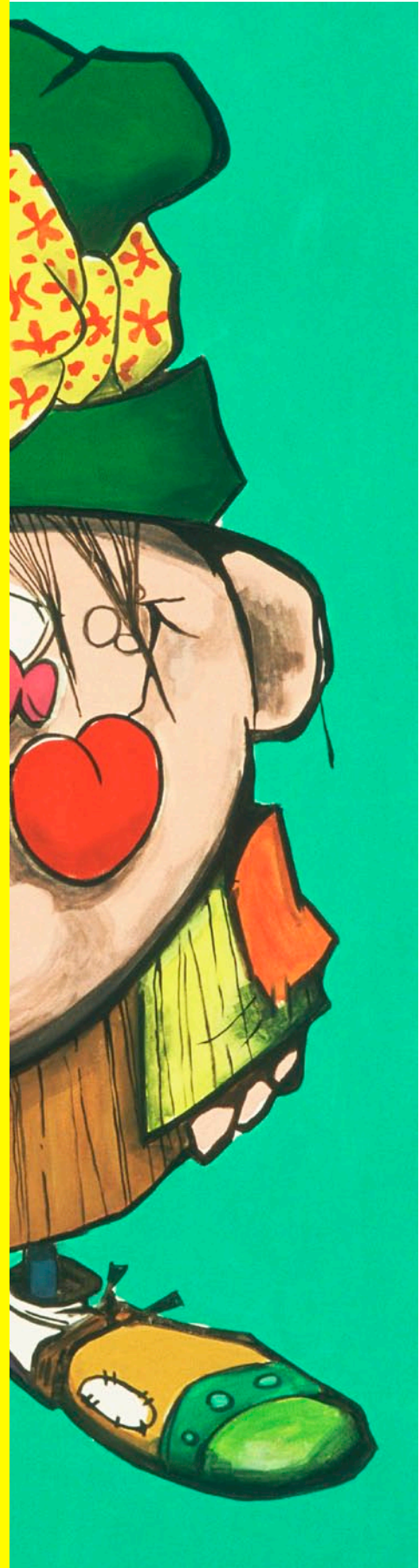


Julia Wachtel



Julia Wachtel

Animating the Painted Stage

Bob Nickas

The audience has seen it all before: pop, minimal, mini-mall, expressionism, neo-ex, neo-this-n-that, pantomime, pictures of pictures. The ventriloquist whose lips won't stop moving, the guy in the fright-wigs, the blunder and bluster of plates in mid-air—crashing down, as if on cue, shattered crockery on the canvas floor. The snake charmer, the shiny rabbit pulled from the same old hat, the comedian who rarely manages a laugh. Listen to the sound of that sad low groan. And then, as the lights dim, a wheezing bum note trumpets the chatter in the room, the horn player on his last desultory breath. The crowd quiets and the emcee appears, a goofball bounced from a box of lucky charms, one big tooth in the gaping hole of a silly grin, a stark contrast to the red velvet curtains behind. Arms outstretched, unlovable, wanting our love all the more, he promises something we hadn't already seen, or at least embodied and performed in quite this way, a reversal of polarity, or bi-polarity as the case may be. One figure up against another, incongruously. Rendered in black and white, and thus all the more believable, primitive figures, caressed by a softness of tone that suggests graphite rather than oil. They are stoic, seemingly mute. Mere inches away, cartoon figures—saccharine, stoned, clueless—stumble forward in garish color and preposterous garb, as loud as their ridiculous costumes. Intoxicated and deranged, perhaps by fumes of paint, the Flashe and lacquer with which they were brought to life. They even startle themselves, demanding attention, not least the man gagged and speechless. How did they end up sharing this particular stage? How does the world of antiquity collide so effortlessly with that of cheap sentiment, greeting cards that one might receive but never send? In the awkward juncture, they pry open an uneasy space, suggesting a comic ethnography. Is this a museum of unnatural history, where life and what appears lifelike merge, where visitors and fetish objects trade places? There are many curators and guards in this museum, the guardians of 'schizo culture,' watching from a safe distance. From afar, the figures placed on display are reflected on either side of what might as well be a glass vitrine, a fragile surface that splits reality on a transparent picture plane. Up close, emotions momentarily stir as they wonder, who may be more appealing? Who is a greater witness to history? Or who, instead, is witless to history? Beauty, after all, is only skin deep, and why would you proceed any further?

Enter, Stage Left

These figures, whether cartoonish or primitive—and doesn't each partake of the other?—have appeared in the work of Julia Wachtel since the early 1980s. She has always made seemingly incongruous pairings, an exaggeration of the bizarre celebrity combos one might encounter on a talk show or a reality series. In her earliest exhibited works, Wachtel appropriated large-format posters, placing Fidel Castro and

Rod Stewart side-by-side, a beaming John Travolta and a sullen, androgynous supermodel, Mussolini appearing to salute a near-naked woman. This latter work's title, *Relations Of Absence* (1981) is particularly revealing. As Wachtel pairs otherwise unrelated, unknown and unknowable figures, she registers an emotional void that defines our 'connectivity' to them, calling attention to a space which is physically but not psychically seamless. And then we notice that life-size silhouettes have been overlaid with black marker, and the effect suggests that members of a movie audience on their way to or from their seats have blocked the light between the projector and the screen.¹ Viewed in this way, the sequence of images takes on the appearance of an illuminated stage, as the silhouettes, even in their flatness, lend a feeling of spatial depth. The celebrities, presented as projections of attraction and desire, reflect our own. One after another, printed images have been pasted on the wall, and though the sequencing and repetition is in no way random, we hold the cast of characters in our eye more readily than in our mind. This is the sort of collage that artists engaged in the late '70s/early '80s, where, rather than excise parts of images and recombine them, they took and repurposed images in their entirety.



Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (Presidential Profile)*, 1979

It's worth noting that the silhouette, an archaic form of representation more reminiscent of the 1880s than the 1980s, was visible once again, most familiarly in the early work of

Sherrie Levine. Levine's silhouettes circa '79 contain and frame pictures within pictures. They visibly delineate and give form to the various structures that surround and define us, whether willingly or not—history, patriarchy, idealized family. Those employed by Wachtel in '80/'81 participate within a larger picture, frames of a movie if you will. They implicate the artist/viewer within the very construction of audience and collective identity, as an inverse visualization giving form to negative space: individuals overshadowed by a world that cannot easily be framed or contained. Both artists address a contested culture from different angles, and for both reproduction can be thought of as asexual. While Levine considers how past and present intermingle, at times incestuously, Wachtel focuses on how the present may anticipate a future imperfect, the body doubled as a form of pictorial cloning. On her later 'stages,' for example, we encounter performers such as Janis Joplin (*Punched Up*, 1987) and Cher, each in triplicate. In the Cher painting, which is appropriately titled *You Disappear Me*, 1987, her co-star is a peg-leg pirate, and by her third 'turn' she appears as a spectral afterimage. Entertainment, as a formulation from that time would have it, erases history. In all her work, Wachtel's investigation has always been decidedly pop-inflected, and thus more locational within the present and also the just passed. Whether by way of shadows cast on that 'screen' or with the rudely unexpected appearance of the cartoon characters, Wachtel interrupts the flow of images and they seem to say: You Are Here.

Among the many compelling subjects raised in the '80s—a time marked by an engagement between artists and their subjects that was both heightened and at a remove, accounting for the artwork and its reception—was an acknowledgement of human estrangement in everyday life. This was perhaps more deeply felt in a still-Warholian world where information and entertainment would collide, where culture was transformed into the industry we have before us today. 'Infotainment' is the term that was brought to bear on the work of many in Wachtel's milieu—Alan Belcher, Gretchen Bender, Peter Nagy, Sarah Charlesworth—and it provides a lens with which to look back on that time and magnify aspects of our own. This estrangement was all the more unsettling for how effortlessly it adopted a facade of normalcy, since it was, in a word, alienation. This, of course was nothing new, and yet, experienced in the everyday as a fact of life it could not go unremarked, and it was inevitable that artists in this period would explore its sources and meaning, turn it back on itself to complicate its reading. Contemporaries of Wachtel's, the artist team of Wallace & Donohue, two women who also wrote collaboratively, made a work in 1985 that was visually mute but spoke volumes in its naming: *The Distance We Feel Around Certain Close Relatives*. Here, as in Wachtel's *Relations of Absence*, relations and relatives may be understood to designate what is alternately connected and disconnected, using familial anxiety as a springboard to the abstract, to examine what is simultaneously oppressive and desired—a necessary and determined undermining of the absolute. Following closely on the heels of those who came to be known as the 'Pictures Generation', any number of artists in this period found complex ways to articulate and re-phrase a simple question: What's wrong with this picture? In so doing, they were able to reanimate picture-making in the wake of classic '60s American pop and its European counterpart, 'Capitalist Realism'. With the passage of more than two

decades, the goods, you might say, were all the more damaged. Looking back on Wachtel's work over the past thirty or so years, we understand that she was less interested in what we consumed than in what we were consumed by: guilt, doubt, insecurity, and a profound lack of real connection to one another that has only deepened over time. This despite all the gadgets that allow us to stay continuously in touch. Although no matter how many personal devices we may have, communication can still be impersonal, distant, even enabling avoidance. Of course, if you don't know what to say, will it ever matter how many and how efficient the means that are at one's fingertips? Here, the speed of technology meets the inertia of anxiety.

Emotional Appeal

Wachtel's major statement from the mid-'80s is her series, *Emotional Appeal* (1986), a dozen paintings that alternate in their hanging from cartoon to primitive figures. Hung on one long wall with a small space between each canvas, they seem to be lined up as if making a curtain call at the close of a show, with the painted *Emcee* at center stage. We, the viewers, are their audience. In the silence of the gallery, however, there is no round of applause, no encore. There is amusement, to be sure, but we may also find ourselves appalled, for in this spectacle the cartoon characters remind us of how a person badly behaved is said to make a spectacle of him- or herself, with all the attendant embarrassment. There may, at the same time, be a real poignancy that is undeniable. The figure with his arms wrapped around himself, wearing a striped shirt in which he might as well be festively bound, identified as *Knot*, is paired with a primitive Wachtel refers to as *Idol*. The two are weirdly interchangeable. They were separated at birth in the studio and then reunited on the gallery stage. The same can be said of *Anthropo*, a primitive, and *Speechless*, a cartoon figure in a straightjacket with a gag over his mouth. They somehow belong together, and are already known to us. These are all stock characters even if their representation is not by way of the same agency. The primitives may remind us of school trips made to museums long ago. Even in hazy recollection they automatically correspond with a generic collection of carved figures, totems and fetish objects, as if we ourselves had dug them up from a dusty past. The cartoons' familiarity, at least for a post-war generation, are also recalled from childhood. These were common to the novelty greeting cards popular in the '60s, although for those who came well after they may seem as archaic as the primitives. The cartoon characters are exaggerations—of innocence, sexiness, exuberance, confusion and buffoonery, often displaying apprehension, dismay or a loss of control, reinforcing any number of stereotypes along the way. They evince a particular classist bent, though not poised in the false and overdetermined space of "high and low," but resolutely caught between the under- and middle class.

Jokes, of course, are always told at someone's expense for another's amusement. They may reveal much about the teller, and when based on anger or resentment jokes are no laughing matter. After all, hasn't the person compelled to defend himself by claiming, "I was only joking," been caught in a moment of thinly veiled aggression? Who aims to avoid another sort of punchline? (*Jokes and Their Relation To The Unconscious*, in this respect, ought to be required reading in every Junior High School.) Part of the greater

function of jokes within a society is that they allow us to catch ourselves laughing when we should not, but do. Gallows humor, for example, did not arise from thin air, but was born of the noose. Laughter releases endorphins in the brain, a natural high. And laughter is contagious, establishing almost involuntary rapport. In Wachtel's work we see an artist who revels in one of the more telling diversions of modern life, the comedy of human relations. Confronted by the cartoon characters in her paintings, and in most cases they do square off with us directly, our response to them can only be conflicted, and how could it not be? For they are meant to mirror, to evasively address, the conflicts within our own expression and its lack. And what is an emotional appeal?



Jerry Lewis, telethon.

The best example, or at least from the '80s, would be the seemingly endless pleas of comedian Jerry Lewis—perhaps the greatest live action cartoon character of all time—on his annual telethon, imploring a television audience to donate money to help disabled children. The phrase 'Give 'til it hurts' comes to mind, for this sort of appeal partakes of guilt and a certain masochism for a worthy cause. In the sad-eyed dog who begs in Wachtel's painting, *Skin Deep* (1985), we are faced with a pitiful yet indelible image of emotional appeal.

Wachtel's cartoon figures are comparable to character actors in a movie or a theater troupe, and, like a director, she deploys and re-deploys them as her 'stock players'. The riotously laughing, clownishly attired figure from *Free Speech* (1984), for example, reappeared six years later, still incredulously beside himself, in *Landscape No. 4 (Inside and Outside)* (1990). One wonders at his source of amusement, since Wachtel has inserted him, twice, within an image of a pro-Palestinian protest. Although 1990 may seem far away, the image could be from this morning's newspaper, or tomorrow's. History, as we know by now, perpetually repeats itself. Just as with the silhouettes, the genre of history painting may seem more from a time past than from our own, but it can still be made relevant today. The cartoon figure in *Landscape No. 4* is an entirely disturbing presence within a manifestation of visceral rebellion, and for some he may only register as offensive. Yet even as Wachtel's generation saw

the world around them as being in no way sacrosanct, their reflection should not be taken at face value, for what appears as a funhouse mirror is meant to acknowledge a distorted view. This is the lens through which the painting must be seen. The notion of 'nothing sacred' was neither arrived at impassively nor more readily employed by a generation that was especially attuned to irony and disaffection. This, in fact, was an inheritance that had value but came with a certain price, and one would not avoid being implicated within the transaction. Wachtel's *Landscape No. 3 (History)* (1990), for example, captures a tense moment when students and the Chinese military converged in Beijing, and the cartoon character she inserts is a timeworn caricature of a painter. With a beret and a paint-smeared smock, clutching a palette and brushes, looking inebriated and hapless in the face of the task at hand, he is more of a ventriloquist's dummy who wonders aloud: how can we translate and give an image to a moment of historic upheaval? His grasp of its enormity must be as tenuous as that of his hands on the tools of his trade. (Is this figure, we might ask, from a card given to a recent art school graduate?) Looking again at the cartoon character who 'crashes' the intifada, it's clear that he represents how a matter of life and death can all too easily be trivialized and laughed off. Here, and not as a double typo, history defeats itself.

The lecherous, running cartoon figure which first appeared in Wachtel's painting, *Half Of It* (1985), reappears in *A Dream Of Symmetry* (1988) three years later. The screened image in this painting is a repeated and reversed still from the 1988 film, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, based on Milan Kundera's novel set amid the Prague spring of '68. The actress Lena Olin, in sexy black underwear and a bowler hat, enamored of her own reflection, in a sense seducing herself, is oblivious to the goofy cartoon figure that runs through the picture. As in the heady times before the Soviet invasion and crackdown, the freedom that Olin represents may be desired and pursued but is ultimately fleeting. While it may seem simplistic to identify the cartoon characters in Wachtel's *Landscape* paintings as the bad guys or the losers, caricatures of misbehavior, when we can identify them as having 'migrated' from earlier paintings in which they were paired with primitives, we see that they have another function in these history paintings. They have been given other parts to play on a painted stage, the world stage in all its turmoil and convulsion. In this series, Wachtel references the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl, protests in Tiananmen Square, and the fall of the Berlin wall. These and other works, you might say, constitute her 'Death and Disaster' series, calling to mind the various tabloid events painted/imprinted by Warhol in the early '60s. Many of his silkscreened paintings were paired with an identically sized monochrome, which Warhol referred to as "the blanks," a space without an image, waiting to be filled. In Wachtel's work, every canvas inhabited by a figure, whether cartoon or primitive, is a blank that has been thus embodied, the screen or curtained stage onto which someone appears. According to Wachtel, her initial attraction to the jokey and sentimental greeting cards was because of their backgrounds, mostly monochrome though also enlivened by graphic elements, geometric patterns, flushes of color and what looked like mottled brushwork. In effect, they were already painterly. Her preferred arrangement of vertical panels or divisions, usually between three and seven, suggests large-format stripe paintings—Ellsworth Kelly invaded by a rather



Steven Parrino, *Gag*

motley crew. And while it may seem odd for some to consider Wachtel's work in such formal terms, we have to remember the milieu from which they emerged, one not concerned with painting per se. If anything, it was an antagonistic climate. And yet when we place her paintings in context with those produced at the end of the '70s/early '80s—and here, for once, it's worth playing representation off of abstraction—you can see how her imagery and that of Steven Parrino helped to establish our idea of what can only be termed *dis-figuration*. The fact that both artists began showing with the East Village gallery Nature Morte drives home the image of still life and a reanimating of what had been claimed to be dead: painting itself. If Wachtel's work is not routinely discussed as painting, this is understandable, both for the volume at which its content is amplified and for the narratives implied and interrupted. And yet we shouldn't overlook the fact that she is and always has been a painter, well attuned to the requirements and dynamics of picture-making—how one arranges pictorial space, and deals with composition, light and chromatics. In the animation of figure/ground, her cast of characters will always dominate. The figures in the earlier paintings are co-stars, or play supporting roles. In the works of the early '90s they are at the same time the stars and extras who have suddenly entered the spotlight, actors meant to fill in the background who have come to the fore. Wachtel seems to be saying, as she did with the early silhouettes, that even as we stand by the sidelines, we are part of the bigger picture, part of and not entirely apart from the system. How we articulate this is another matter.

Exit, Stage Right

There is a painting of Wachtel's from 1986 that is not so well known but can be seen as central to her project. This is a shaped canvas, the only one she has ever made, a large black heart which contains the message that serves as its title,



Speechless

It's Reassuring To Know We Can Talk About Anything. In all likelihood, the original heart was bright red, though the text seems inappropriate for a Valentine's Day card. A black heart can be thought to signify the impossibility of love. As the carrier of this particular message, the instantly recognizable form encompasses the impossibility of communication, or at least that which is intimate, face-to-face. The card is a surrogate for a personal encounter, and whatever message is contained it is also a surrogate for the articulation of emotions, particularly for expressions of love or loss, which many tend to engage uneasily or reluctantly. Wachtel's figures thus find correspondence with the stuffed dolls and animals in Mike Kelley's *Arena* pieces, perhaps most poignantly with his combine, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid* (1987). The otherwise cute and cuddly toys amassed in this work of Kelley's are anything but, as they represent nothing less than our being held hostage to re-directed emotion, and by way of the gift, indebted not to what was given but to what is forever owed. En masse, they are in no way comforting, but suffocating. Any number of artists in that mid-to-late '80s moment shifted our attention from the shiny new commodities that had dominated the period to what was more human, forgotten and forlorn, and of greater consequence, a realism that was perhaps too real. The arrival of a new car in a greeting card appropriated by Wachtel, for example, was met with attendant jealous anxiety, for the sender reminded the recipient, a good friend or close relative no doubt, of the car payments that would have to be met.²

Commodity culture may have been about being possessed and potentially transformed—Barbara Kruger's "Buy me, I'll change your life"—but what followed, its consequence, would raise the possibility of being repossessed. Art and life, as art and commerce, are of course intimately entwined. The fact that the economic bubble of the '80s—today objectified as a giant balloon dog, a

stick having been thrown to be fetched and victoriously returned—could not be endlessly sustained, was indirectly anticipated by artists at that time. This was only coincidental in terms of what came to pass, rather than by what was clearly foreseen. Looking back on *Emotional Appeal* nearly thirty years later, the series is emblematic of its time without in any way seeming anachronistic. Quite the opposite, since it is both prescient and relevant for today's world, a 'world' in which people routinely friend and un-friend one another with the click of a mouse, in some cases individuals never met or barely known. In other words, where human interaction can no longer be defined as neither human nor interactive. (And those early silhouettes also serves as reminders that what people encounter today is, increasingly, not a person at all, but a 'profile'.) Even the surrogate message of a printed card would register as the most genuinely whole-hearted expression of feeling, of concern, of reaching out to someone else. And thirty years' time has not dulled the power of Wachtel's work to confound, delight and disturb our senses. Without doubt, the figures on the stage of *Emotional Appeal* must appear every bit as strangely mental as the day they were born.

In Wachtel's *Landscape* series, history is never predicted, only witnessed. As we cross-examine its participants and gate-crashers, we come to understand that in her choosing of whom to insert she suggests that bystanders are not

always innocent. Just as it's clear that Wachtel has summoned cartoon characters from earlier paintings to appear in later works, a faded star making a half-hearted comeback, we can plainly see who's missing from these pictures. Wachtel has never redeployed the primitive figures. Can we imagine the primitives as somehow both preceding and following those from the greeting cards? As if her comic figures had drastically aged, expired and ossified? And if she were to bring them back, what exactly would it mean to insert *Anthropo* within the Palestian protest? Or to place *Sugar Baby* alongside the right-to-lifers parading with an oversized crucifix? Or, for that matter, to have *Feathered Serpent* sidle up to a Chinese tank? If these representations stand for the past and the very order of civilization, even as false idols, those of our time rise and collapse under the weight of disorder and discontent. And if the primitives represent the cartoon characters at the proverbial end of the line, and they are equally relics of another time, those figures of fun will forever remain recognizable. Look around you in the street today, for they walk among us still.

Notes

1. Wachtel raised the connection between the silhouettes and audience members at a movie who momentarily block the screen. In conversation with the author, in the artist's studio, July 25, 2014.
2. *Untitled*, 1983, a collaboration with Haim Steinbach.



It's Reassuring To Know We Can Talk About Anything, 1986



JULIA WACHTEL

**31. OKTOBER – 14. DESEMBER
NO.5**

Åpner 31. oktober kl 20:00

Omvisninger hver søndag kl 14:00

Tours every Sunday at 2pm



B E R G E N
KUNSTHALL

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JULIA WACHTEL

31. OKTOBER – 14. DEZEMBER
NO.5

32



Julia Wachtel, *Horn player*, 1986. 127 × 86.3 cm

Åpning / Opening

31.10. 20:00

Omvisninger / Tours*Hver søndag / Every Sunday 14:00*

30.10. 18:00 Medlem

2.11. 13:00 Barnefamilier

Julia Wachtels malerier tar i bruk et repertoar av bilder hentet fra hverdagens populærkultur som hun på ulike måter approprierer og forandrer. Wachtel forbindes ofte med den såkalte «Pictures Generation» i amerikansk kunst på 1980-tallet, der kritisk appropriasjon av populærkulturens språk og billedverden var en fellesnevner. Hennes malerier fra denne perioden fremstår fremdeles usedvanlig poengterte og komplekse i sin analyse av «skuespillersamfunnet» slik det fremsto med full tyngde på midten av 1980-tallet. Bergen Kunsthall presenterer med denne utstillingen utvalgte verker fra Wachtels separatutstilling ved Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago i 1991. Her ble to sentrale verksgrupper fra kunstnerens produksjon ved inngangen til 1990-tallet presentert.

33

Serien *Emotional Appeal* (1986) sammenstiller to svært ulike, men like stereotypiske, figurgrupper. Wachtels hyppig brukte vokabular av karikerte, groteske tegneseriefigurer, hovedsakelig hentet fra gratulasjonskort som var typiske på denne tiden, kombineres med bilder av statuer og masker hentet fra såkalt «primitive» kulturer. *Emotional Appeal* er nærmest perverst humoristisk, og samtidig ubehagelig forstyrrende i sitt nivå av grell overflatiskhet. Gjennom den eksplisitte sidestillingen avhistoriserer Wachtel begge figurgruppene. Det heterogene

materialet trer frem som helt sidestilte billedprodukter hvor kulturelle stereotyper og grunnleggende menneskelige emosjoner behandles.

Denne bevisste blandingen av kritikalitet, ambivalens og

I NO.5 re-presenterer Bergen Kunsthall kunstverk og utstillinger som tidligere har vært vist de siste 5 – 50 årene. Programserien er et motsvar til den økende akselerasjonen av både produksjon og resepsjon av kunst det siste tiåret, og en anledning til å skru ned tempoet, komme tilbake til og fokusere på utvalgte verk eller utstillinger. Bergen Kunsthall vil bestille en ny tekst skrevet spesielt for hver av utstillingene.

menneskelig psykologi er også fremtredende i serien *Landscapes* som Wachtel innledet i 1991, og som hun har fortsatt helt frem til i dag. I disse arbeidene opptre de samme tegneseriefigurene igjen, men nå i kombinasjon med dagsaktuelle fotografier fra mainstream nyhetsmedier. De hysteriske figurene fungerer her som symbolske kommentarer til de religiøse, kulturelle, ideologiske eller politiske temaene som

representeres i nyhetsfotografiene. Figurene både forsterker og underminerer fotografiene på samme tid.

Denne utstillingen viser deler av Julia Wachtels separatutstilling ved Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 23. mars – 13. april 1991. Den følges av en ny tekst av Bob Nickas. **Julia Wachel** (f. 1956) bor og arbeider i New York. •

Julia Wachtel's paintings deploy a repertoire of images drawn from everyday popular culture which she variously appropriates, and transforms. Wachtel is often linked with the so-called 'Pictures Generation' in the American art of the 1980s, in which the critical appropriation of the imagery and languages of popular culture was a common denominator. Her paintings from that period still make an unusually pointed, complex impact with their analysis of the 'society of the spectacle' as manifested in full flood in the mid-1980s. With this exhibition, Bergen Kunsthall presents selected works from Wachtel's solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 1991, where two central groups of work from the artist's production on the threshold of the 1990s, were presented.

The series *Emotional Appeal* (1986) brings together two very different but equally stereotypical figure groups. The first, Wachtel's frequently used vocabulary of caricatured, grotesque cartoon figures, taken mainly from greeting cards of the period, is combined with images of statues and masks drawn from so-called 'primitive' cultures. *Emotional Appeal* is almost perversely humorous, while at the same time its level of garish superficiality is uncomfortably disturbing.

In NO.5 Bergen Kunsthall revisits selected artworks and exhibitions, previously presented over the last 5 – 50 years. Initiated in response to the increasing acceleration of both the production and reception of art over the last decade, NO.5 provides an opportunity to slow down, focus on, and revisit particular works, exhibitions or fragments of exhibitions. Bergen Kunsthall will commission a new critical text to accompany each of these re-presentations.

Through this explicit juxtaposition Wachtel de-historicizes both figure groups. The heterogeneous materials emerge as image-products that treat cultural stereotypes, and apparently fundamental human emotions, on an equal footing.

This deliberate mix of the critical, the ambivalent, and an engagement with human psychology, is also evident in the series *Landscapes*, which Wachtel

began in 1991 and which continue to this day. In these works the familiar cartoon figures again appear, but now in combination with topical photographs taken from mainstream news media. In these works the hysterical figures function as symbolic, and at times almost hysterical, comments on the religious, cultural, ideological or political themes represented in the news photographs, simultaneously amplifying and undermining them.

This exhibition re-presents part of Julia Wachtel's solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 23 March–13 April 1991. It is accompanied by a new text by Bob Nickas.

Julia Wachtel (b. 1956) lives and works in New York. •

JULIA WACHTEL

ENGLISH

31 OCTOBER — 14 DECEMBER
NO.5

In NO.5 Bergen Kunsthall revisits selected artworks and exhibitions, previously presented elsewhere in the world. Initiated in response to the increasing acceleration of both the production and reception of art, NO.5 provides an opportunity to slow down, focus on, and look again at particular works, exhibitions or fragments of exhibitions. Bergen Kunsthall will commission a new critical text to accompany each of these re-presentations.

This exhibition re-presents part of Julia Wachtel's solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Spring/Summer 1991. It is accompanied by edition #2 of our new publication series NO.5 with a text by Bob Nickas.

Tours:

Every Sunday at 2pm

30 October at 6pm for Members

2 November at 1pm for Families

Platform:

25 November at 7pm, Quinn Latimer on Julia Wachtel

B E R G E N
K U N S T H A L L

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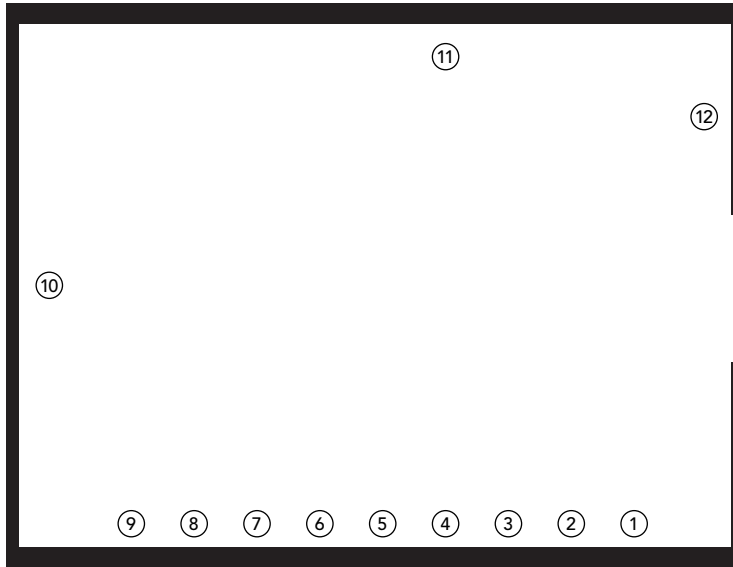
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from so-called 'primitive' cultures. *Emotional Appeal* is almost perversely humorous, while at the same time its level of garish superficiality is uncomfortably disturbing. Through this explicit juxtaposition Wachtel de-historicizes both figure groups. The heterogeneous materials emerge as image-products that treat cultural stereotypes, and apparently fundamental human emotions, on an equal footing.

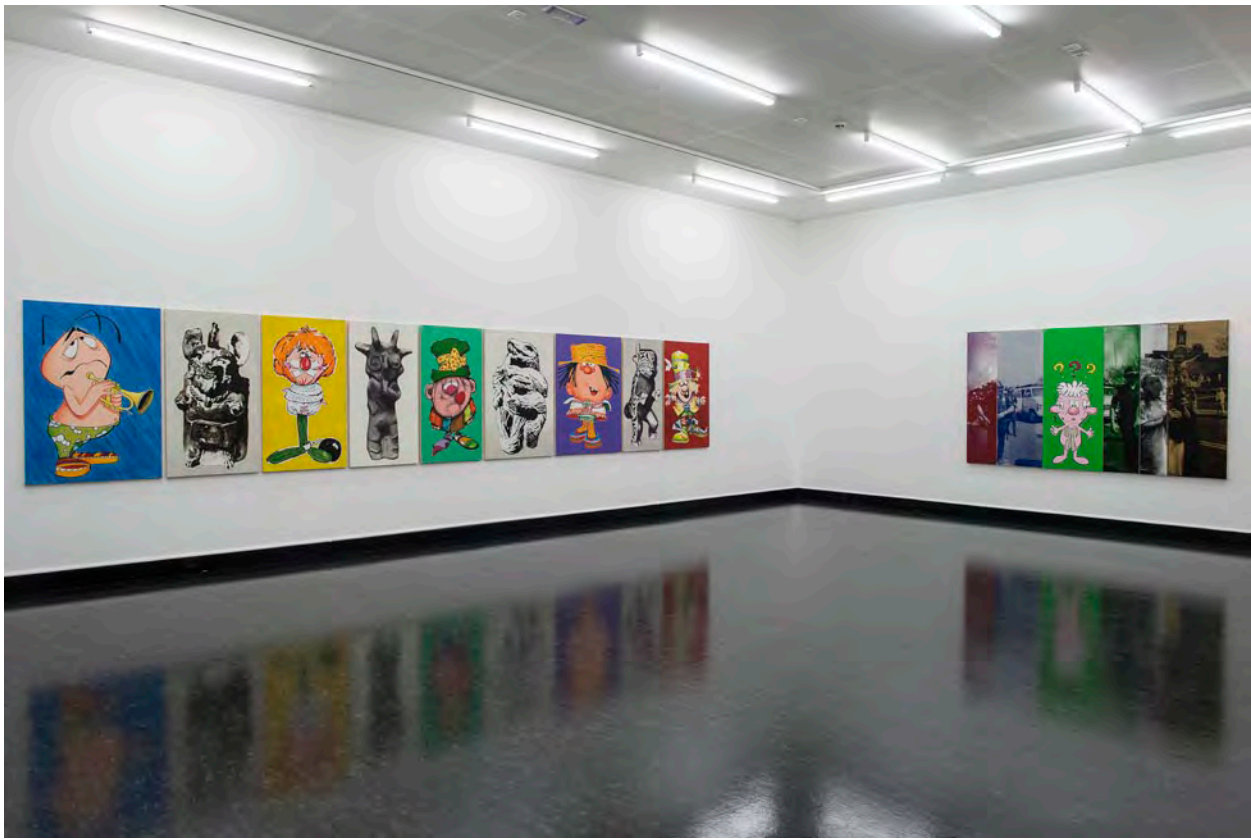
This deliberate mix of the critical, the ambivalent, and an engagement with human psychology, is also evident in the series *Landscapes*, which Wachtel began in 1991 and which continue to this day. In these works the familiar cartoon figures again appear, but now in combination with topical photographs taken from mainstream news media. In these works the hysterical figures function as symbolic, and at times almost hysterical, comments on the religious, cultural, ideological or political themes represented in the news photographs, simultaneously amplifying and undermining them.

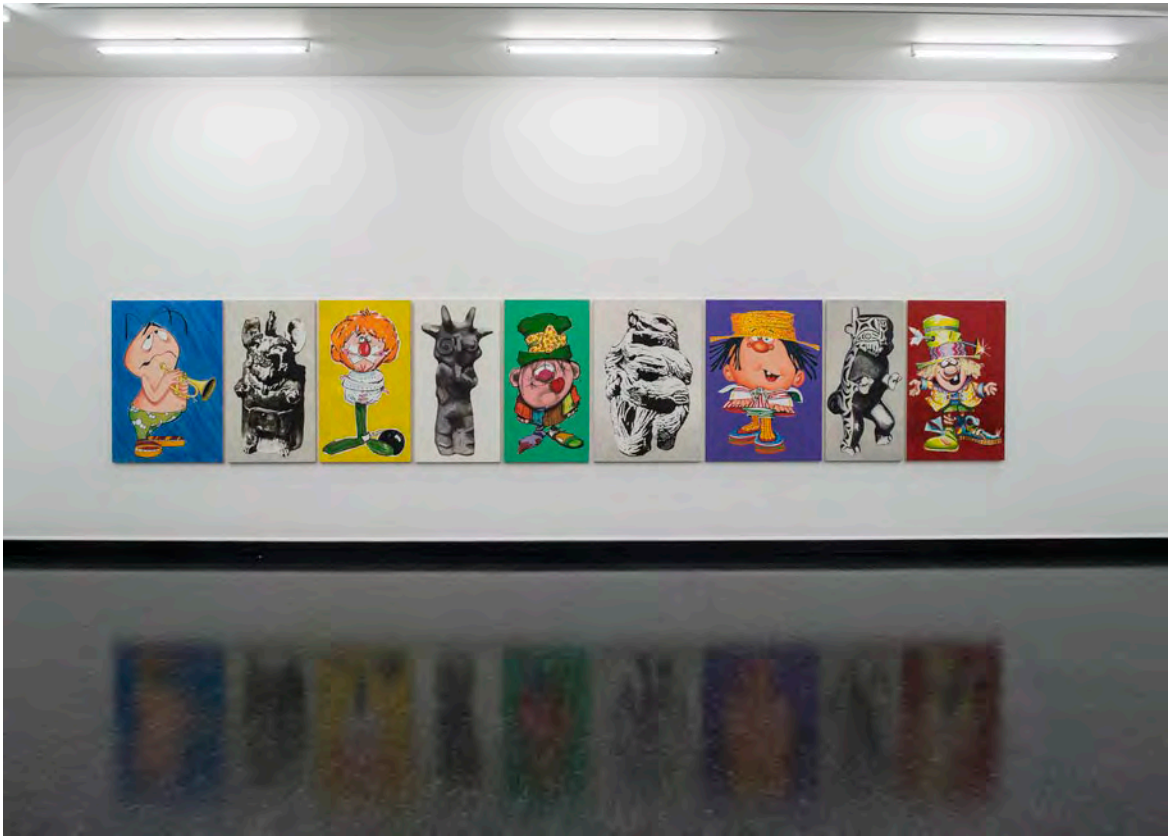
Julia Wachtel (b. 1956) lives and works in New York.

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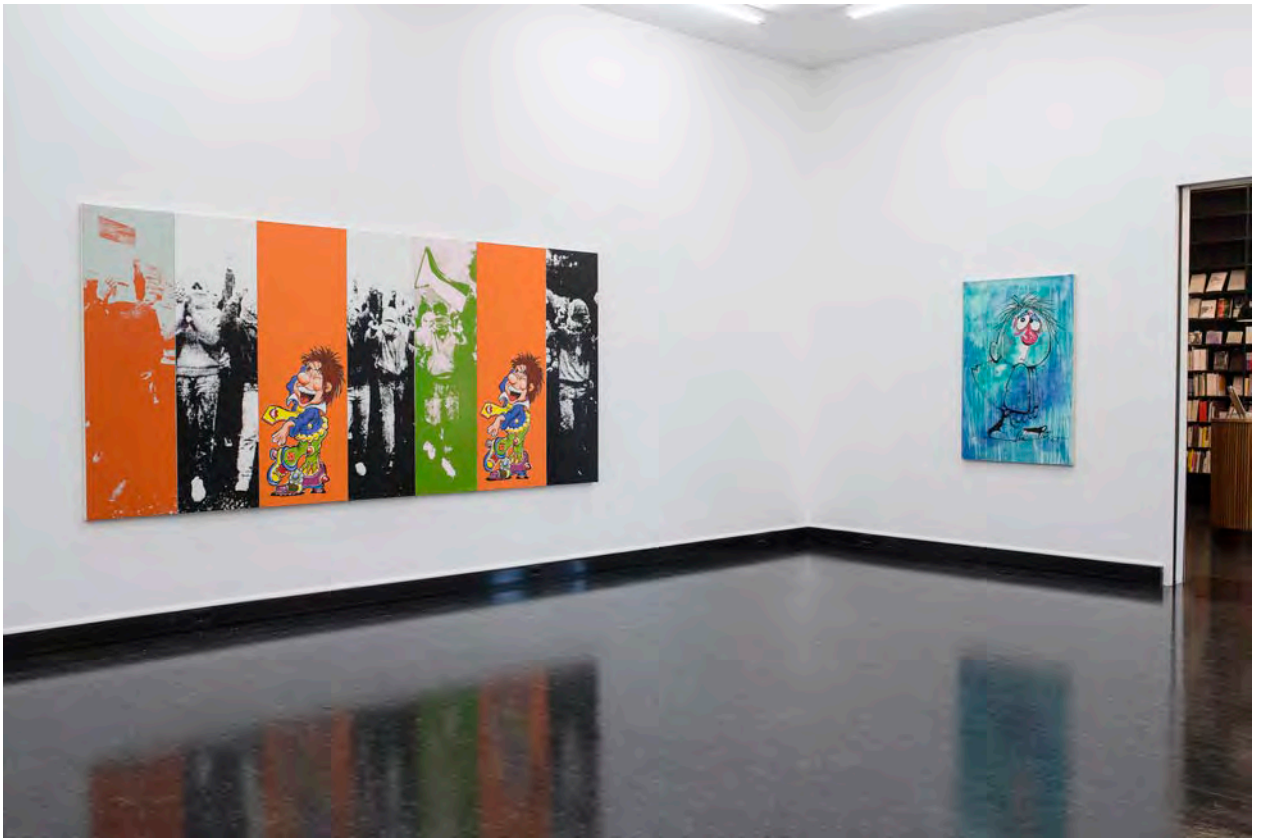


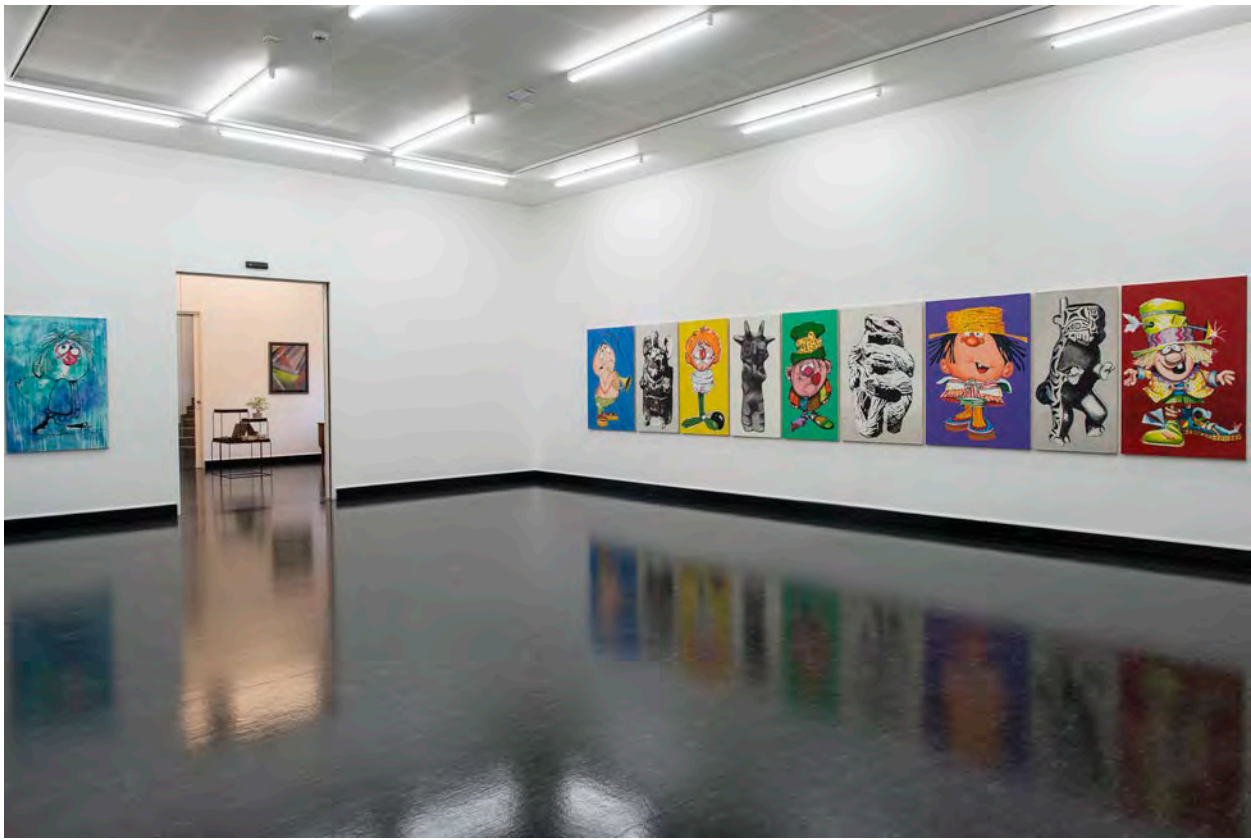
- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1 <u>Horn player</u>, 1986
127 x 86.3 cm
Courtesy the artist</p> <p>2 <u>Mouse</u>, 1986
127 x 68,5 cm
Private collector, NY</p> <p>3 <u>Speechless</u>, 1986
127 x 71.1 cm
Collection Ron Low</p> <p>4 <u>Sugar baby</u>, 1986
127 x 66 cm
Courtesy the artist</p> <p>5 <u>Dead weight</u>, 1986
127 x 66 cm
Collection Ron Low</p> <p>6 <u>Feathered serpent</u>, 1986
127 x 86.3 cm
Courtesy the artist</p> | <p>7 <u>Big Head</u>, 1986
127 x 91,4 cm
Private collector, Florida</p> <p>8 <u>Painted figure</u>, 1986
127 x 83.8 cm
Courtesy the artist</p> <p>9 <u>Emcee</u>, 1986
127 x 66 cm
Courtesy the artist</p> <p>10 <u>Landscape No. 7 (?)</u>, 1990
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152 x 259 cm
Private collection, Europe</p> <p>11 <u>Landscape No.4 (inside and outside)</u>, 1990
152,4 x 330, 2 cm
Private collector</p> <p>12 <u>Damaged</u>, 1986
127 x 86.3 cm
Courtesy the artist</p> |
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Flash Art

THE LEADING EUROPEAN ART MAGAZINE • N° 132 - FEBRUARY/MARCH 1987 • \$ 6.00



JEFF KOONS, ITALIAN WOMAN, 1986.
STAINLESS STEEL, 30" x 18" x 11". COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTO FRED SCRUTON.

ANXIOUS OBJECTS

PARRINO, STAHL, WACHTEL

ROBERT NICKAS

Steven Parrino, Mark Stahl and Julie Wachtel produce work which is dissimilar in its outward appearance, but they are all concerned with calling the viewer's attention to its internal features. For Wachtel the viewer may be "caught within a structure of excesses and deprivation. The painting becomes a site for anxiety". In Stahl's work, decoration is identified as having "all surface, no depth or substance, nothing essential", and is presented as "reconstructed in an image of the decorative". But each of these artists is concerned with what Parrino calls "the questioning nature of the object", a concern shared and explored by an

increasing number of artists working today.

If the 1980's are about anything they're negative associations. These people have what is commonly called an "attitude problem". Today, as in the late 1960's, we can identify the mind and attitude of the artist as central to production. Like Minimal Art, Conceptual Art, Process and Arte Povera, this is work in which attitude plays a significant part, not only in appearance, but also in its manufacture and presentation. This centrality is present today in that some of the strategies, motives and attitudes associated with that other moment are still intact, but have been realigned to

our current needs. At the same time there is a seductive variable within the work which we can no longer identify, as it was possible to do in the late 60's, as a side effect of its appearance. But then, as now, some artists did not set out to charm the souls of art lovers. Nevertheless, souls were, and are charmed. Today, however, the time necessary for this seduction to occur has been considerably condensed, a phenomenon which, in the most speculative terms, may have nothing to do with the attitudes of the artists.

STEVEN PARRINO

Robert Nickas: *The word attitude seems to have always had negative associations. To say that someone has "an attitude problem" is a fairly common complaint. But attitude seems to have been rehabilitated in art, particularly in a lot of "anxious objects".*

Steven Parrino: Is this "attitude" manifested in the object or in the manufacture? The attitude in art that I am interested in has a history that I find to be the base of American art, starting with Johns and Rauschenberg, and pioneered by artists such as Stella, Judd and Warhol. Art prior to Johns and Rauschenberg was dependent upon a European tradition. This tradition was basically illusionistic. Objects or events were pictured within an illusionistic space, starting with deep Renaissance space and ending with Cubism, the subsequent flattening of Renaissance space. A painting that, say, Frank Stella may manufacture is an object that questions a set notion of art within an inherent form. The painting does not recede into an illusionistic space; instead, the painting invades the viewer's space. The best American art shares a plain logic that is concerned with a whole effect, and has little regard for relational parts that detract from this whole. Even though these artists use a highly objective approach, the subjective response is often an absurd feeling due to the questioning nature of the object.

RN: *David Robbins claims we're better off*

with a perverse whole rather than with none at all. How does this relate to style? Or is that even possible?

SP: My work is not so much about style as it is about just getting things down with a certain clarity. The work should deal directly with presenting a present situation. The work is more about a questioning of the primary meaning within the object.

RN: *Does this situation implicate the viewer? Leave viewers open to reveal something about themselves they wouldn't normally or willingly volunteer? Does it function as a detector that reveals more about the viewer than it does about itself?*

SP: Yes, it does.

RN: *Some of your recent paintings incorporate language in a way that parallels Vito Acconci's or Bruce Nauman's use of language, which has been misinterpreted as antagonistic on more than one occasion.*

SP: I may use ridicule as a device to offset the painting's status as art and how this is assessed by the viewer. I mean, just because it's a painting, is it art? The mis-stretched monochromes that I make are very much about misuse. I use certain words for their physical bulk. This bulk or weight is in the look of the word, and in its meaning.

RN: *You refer to painting as a device . . .*

SP: Painting is used as an assisted ready-made. When I first started painting I wanted to find out what exactly a painting is at this present moment. Taking account of the history and rhetoric that painting has gathered, I came to the point of considering

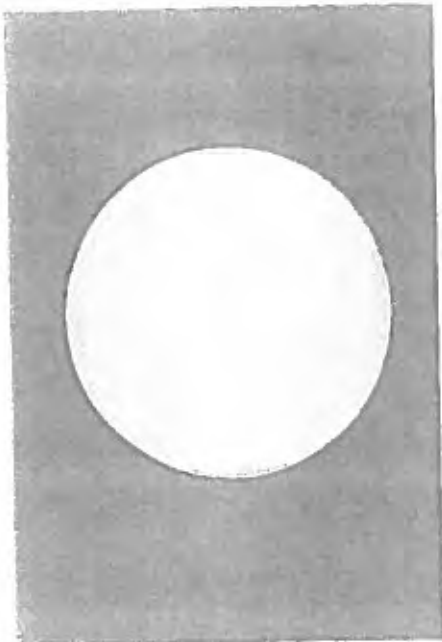


STEVEN PARRINO, BLUE IDIOT, 1986. ENAMEL ON CANVAS 6 x 4. PRIVATE COLLECTION. COURTESY NATURE MORTE, NEW YORK

painting in this way. The ready-made is an object that is placed as art. An assisted ready-made is an object of shared recognition that the artist has altered.

RN: *That's precisely what a lot of work today is about.*

SP: I see a lot of painting today as problematic because of an illustrative tendency. The idea of the borrowed motif is interest-



STEVEN PARRINO, BIG HOLE, 1986.
ENAMEL ON CANVAS, 6' x 4'.
COURTESY NATUE MORTE, NEW YORK.

ing up to a point — “this looks like that and that looks like this.” The more interesting side that almost no one seems to address is “this is not that and that is not this, and what does this cause and why do I feel like this in relation to that, and did I feel that then or did I feel the same, and do I always feel the same.” As for my work, it is “just there” in human proportion. Any given conclusion will generate a question or another reading. The work does not function as an illustration for an idea. The painting is not a picture, not a representation of something, but a concrete fact. Art must exist on a human level and deal with experience on that level.

MARK STAHL

Robert Nickas: *Maurice Berger recently referred—at the expense of Greenberg—to the well-known quote of Matisse, in which Matisse spoke of art as an armchair for the tired businessman. This quote is not without its charm even taken out of context, particularly vis-a-vis a certain kind of work that is being produced today.*

Mark Stahl: Few flock to art for enlightenment; many flood it for entertainment. People don't want to be preached to or lectured. The quality of seduction is essential. That boredom was ever afforded a critical position appears incredible given today's standards. Without entertainment there is no art. Art should provoke entertainment, not merely aspire to it.

RN: *Are we then all merely being driven to distraction?*

MS: Distraction is a key concept: a momentary reprieve from capitalism's

appropriation of time to the category of space. To be everywhere at one and the same time, to be nowhere, to be constantly “spaced-out;” this is the value of distraction.
RN: *That sounds like what Stuart Davis called “the air-conditioned now.”*

MS: Today, works want to be designed to immediately divulge their contents. A multiplicity of readings and interpretations, the intricate provenance of a work, complex historical references: these qualities are inadmissible. People want to know *now* what it is they are looking at. Attention spans are short. We want things to yield themselves to us in an instant. Pleasure should be quick, gratification instantaneous. This attests to the intense compression of time and space that we're living through.
RN: *That reminds me of Meyer Vaisman's painting with the baby bottle nipples affixed to its surface—it's called The Dung Market. But my take on “the air-conditioned now”—and it may not be one that Davis meant to suggest—is of window shopping, but from the inside looking out.*

MS: The department store conditioned and refined the pleasure derived from the voluntary submission to the lure of the commodity-fetish. The activity of browsing was ushered in with the advent of the modern department store. Impulse buying as well was unknown before the department store appeared. The aesthetic that accompanied this time—the era of the urban—celebrated the sensual and the immediate, the transitory and the ephemeral—the fragmented moment.

The aesthetic of the era of the shopping mall celebrates the perfectly synthetic, the surrogate and the simulated; it promotes a false unity of experience. It offers an utterly synthetic spectacle that flagrantly parades its own imminent collapse as part of its

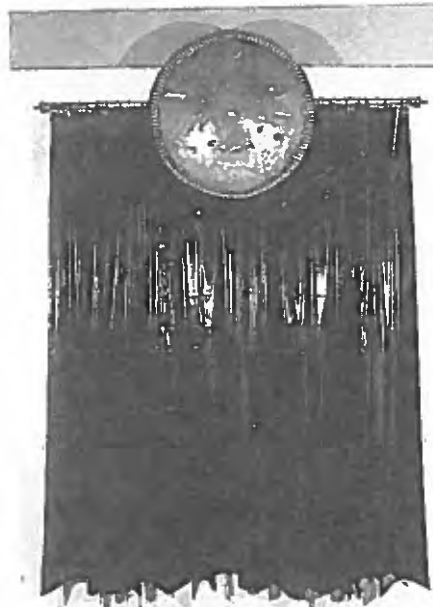
undeniable appeal. (That many malls are simulations of old town centres is no accident).

RN: *And the removal and subsequent representation of objects from this context? Doesn't it amount to a kind of piracy, a form of hi-jacking?*

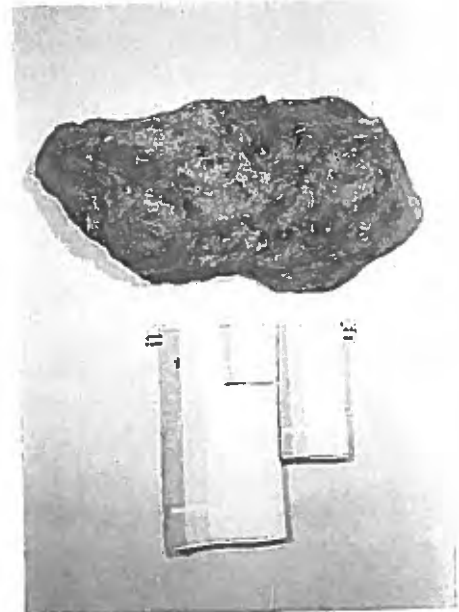
MS: What is criminal? To lay the mask on the face? To impose a thoroughly subjective reading on an overdetermined practice? To use an object in blatant disregard of its intended use?

RN: *Not in a society where, as it's been suggested, “exchange-value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced . . .” Moreover, it's been claimed that people reveal their “genuine mentality . . . if you abolish social conventions and strip away the masks that are imposed on us by the comedy of human relations”. Similarly, the latent reality of an object emerges when its utilitarian relationship with its environment has been destroyed.*

MS: Everything has the potential to become foreign, to be rescued from the obscurity and obsolescence of use-value. Decoration is unabashedly superfluous: that's its attraction. Decoration is all surface, no depth or substance, nothing essential; it can be the phony, the fake, the shoddy. I want a decoration subverted, perverted, stripped of its identity—the decorative re-constructed in an *image* of the decorative. I'm interested in this space of miscomprehension and misreading (what doesn't “translate”) operative between the familiar and its reproduction via the agency of another culture, or a sub-cultural body. Decoration is often the benign instrument that delivers us to the *exotic*. The programmatic image of the foreign and exotic can only deliver us to the



MARK STAHL, NOT JUST ANOTHER CROWD PLEASER, 1984. SHOWER CURTAIN, KYDEX SHIELD, FLUORESCENT LIGHT FIXTURE. COURTESY MASSIMO AUDIELLO, NEW YORK.



MARK STAHL, LET ME GUESS: YOU WEAR SOFT CONTACTS, 1986. FIBREGLASS BOULDER, TOWELS AND TOWEL BAR. PRIVATE COLLECTION.

front door of our own discontent—healthy consumers may discover this for they are, after all, perpetual tourists in their own countries.

JULIE WACHTEL

Robert Nickas: *I've referred to our current perverse sense of time as the ever-present now—the eroticized frozen moment. Your work seems to be conscious of something like this, to be blatantly suggestive of it as problematic.*

Julie Wachtel: Yes. I believe one of the residual effects of this hyperstated "present" is the disappearance of the historical. The past is constantly being erased by the perpetual flow of the moment. Information is transmitted as an ever-present foreground. There is no background. We find ourselves before this flow of undifferentiated "moments" which are presented as natural and outside history, and it is only here through our identification with this flow that we are meant to feel real.

RN: *Which in your paintings compels us to look upon two radically different images simultaneously.*

JW: I think of my work as freezing a very small section of this flow and presenting it as an object for scrutiny. I am trying to bring attention to those seams between images that the media presents as invisible—as seamless. I believe that this seamless flow functions libidinally and is thus very successful in producing spectators in a position of fixation before it. My work is about that point of contact between different representations, each announcing their presence in unison, with equal volume, equal weight, equal importance.

RN: *Of these two images, what specifically interests you in these greeting cards? They*

aren't exactly the kind one would be pleased to receive or, for that matter, think to send—not that the more traditional or "normal" cards are any less disturbing in how they express sentiment.

JW: The greeting cards I select literally convey anxiety—fear of being stupid, of being poor, of being ugly, of being unable to express oneself. We are overinvested in the cult of personality. The greeting cards I use present the personality gone awry. They are representative of the middle and lower classes and suggest, I believe, a position of impotency within the greater social field. For me the use of the cards works to fight against a problematic and romantic notion of an emotionality independent of the social relations of which it is inextricably a part.

RN: *And the images of primitive objects?*

JW: When I first started this body of work three years ago I was only working with cartoon images. I soon realized that there was a risk that they would not be perceived as sincere, so I decided I needed something that somehow represented authenticity of emotion. I first started out with images of American folk art. It functioned as a sign for the naïve, for unsocialized emotions. This led me to the "primitives" which similarly were perceived as signs for the directly expressed—unmediated expression. Of course, I feel that this view of them as pure, unsophisticated and unsocialized is a complete misreading, and is an interpretation filled with racist and imperialist overtones. On one hand I was playing on the privileged and rarified status of the primitive art object in order to pull up the cartoon image from its degraded aesthetic locale, and on the other hand I was playing on the mundane and economic locale of the card to affect one's reading of the primitive

that would acknowledge its prior meaningful existence within the social order from which it was extracted.

RN: *And what's your aim in orchestrating the collision of these two images?*

JW: Our culture produces a constant flow of images as if they were meant to co-exist. I put images together that want to break apart from each other. On one level it is simply my will, my claim that they co-exist by calling it a painting that forces one to look at these images as a unity. It is a unity that has no organic basis, no claim to normality. But it is a unity held in place by the institutional claim of painting.

RN: *But with paintings used as a kind of "controlled substance," what happens when one begins to make connections between the two opposing images in this situation?*

JW: It's not only my claim to power—my enforcing of this heterogeneous material. It is also that despite the apparent irrationality in the juxtapositions, relationships begin to appear which challenge that claim. The images start to work by signalling their common marginality. The greeting cards in their depictions of rejects and failures, and the primitives in their implicit representation of the Third World.

RN: *And what about a sense of the ironic? Irony is something found in superabundance—you take one step out of your house and suddenly you're falling all over it—but it's not easily synthesized. There's something in your work that suggests what I've called "synthetic irony."*

JW: My work can be seen in these terms, but fabricated in such a way as a double negative. In other words, through the cancelling out of ironies one moves to a new position that is not at all ironic. For me redundancy is interesting in that it employs the logic of repetition and equivalence while negating it at the same time. It thus recovers the image in terms of its ambivalence. But for me irony is really no more than an empty vehicle. I don't feel my position is at all cynical. I'm trying to deal with the possibilities and impossibilities of expression within a cultural context that to a frightening degree produces synthetic expression. Witness the recent phenomena of events such as Live Aid, Hands Across America, and Liberty Weekend, all of which were artificially creating a mood in which to feel good, to feel proud, to feel benevolent.

RN: *So what place does the viewer have in relation to your work?*

JW: I don't know if that's for me to say. But for me in the ambivalent position of being caught within a structure of excess and deprivation, the painting becomes a site for anxiety.

RN: *The painting as an anxious object?*

JW: The painting as symptom.



JULIE WACHTEL, UNTITLED, 1985.
OIL ON CANVAS, 60" x 45".
COURTESY BROOKLYN MUSEUM.



JULIE WACHTEL, HALF OF IT, 1985.
OIL ON CANVAS, 2 PANELS 35" x 54" EACH.
COURTESY NATURE MORTE AND DIANE BROWN GALLERY.

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J U L I A W A C H T E L

March 23 through April 13, 1991
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Julia Wachtel

This catalogue was produced in conjunction with the exhibition "OPTIONS 41: Julia Wachtel,"
March 23 through April 13, 1991, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

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The Museum of Contemporary Art is pleased to present the work of Julia Wachtel in the 41st of its Options exhibitions. For the past 11 years, the MCA has featured the work of emerging artists in this series of exhibitions. This exhibition of Julia Wachtel's recent work allows us to see the growth of one of our most challenging and exciting artists. It is an added pleasure to have this catalogue to mark this important exhibition.

The efforts of many people have made this exhibition and catalogue a reality. First and foremost, I would like to thank Julia Wachtel for her work and her cooperation with the MCA to make this exhibition and catalogue a reality. Special thanks also go to Lynne Warren, MCA Associate Curator, for organizing the exhibition and catalogue and for writing a perceptive essay on the artist. Joshua Decter also authored an insightful essay for the catalogue, for which he deserves thanks.

Neither the exhibition nor the catalogue would have been possible without the cooperation of the collectors of Julia Wachtel's work. We are therefore grateful for the generosity of the Progressive Corporation, Mayfield Heights, Ohio; Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio; Martin and Janet Blinder, Beverly Hills, California; Collection Collins + Milazzo, New York; Pierre Huber, Geneva, Switzerland; Penny and David McCall, New York; and Robert Schiffler, Greenville, Ohio; and a private collector in New York. We also thank Lela Hersh, MCA Registrar, for expertly arranging the shipping of the works, and Don Meckley for installing the show.

Our gratitude also goes to Jim Hinchee, who worked closely with Julia Wachtel in designing this handsome catalogue. His sensitivity to her work is apparent on every page of this book. Thomas Fredrickson, MCA Editor, deserves thanks for helping to shape the text presented in this volume. Laura Schwartz and Nancy Litwin provided invaluable assistance as research assistants on the artist's biography and bibliography.

Finally, we extend our sincere thanks to those individuals and organizations whose generosity made the exhibition and catalogue possible. The catalogue has been generously supported by Galerie Georges-Philippe Vallois, Paris, and for this we are very grateful. The exhibition is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; and the City of Chicago Department for Cultural Affairs.



Me and Farrah, 1980
Poster and marker
182.8 × 60.9 cm (72 × 24 in.)

CRITICAL ENTERTAINMENTS

JOSHUA DECTER

W

hen we speak of that 20th-century art which has been based on a preoccupation with “mass media” and “popular culture,” we often fail to pose a necessary and trenchant question: What socio-cultural conditions have bred artists’ abiding fascination with so-called “low culture”? This query helps us to focus upon the constituent (aesthetic, theoretical, philosophical, political, ideological, psychological, etc.) features of the historical trajectory that has privileged the appropriation of the ordinary, the utilitarian, and everyday things as the stuff of artistic production. This process necessarily brings about both a transformation and a transvaluation of the conventional meanings of Everyday objects. What is less clear are the implications of an aesthetic paradigm fueled by an artist’s fetishistic relationship to the supposedly commonplace (or the realm of non-art). Beyond the radical inversion of traditional aesthetic categories that this has caused, we must also recognize art’s desire to imagine itself as indistinguishable from the everyday. The more art assumes the condition of non-art through a chameleon-like assimilation of an “everyday vernacular,” the more that “everyday” becomes subject to revised aesthetic readings or considerations. Art that recognizes the aforementioned cultural contradictions often embraces paradox as a tool for critique.

To return to historical first principles, we must discuss Marcel Duchamp and what might be described as the “Readymade paradigm.” What is a Readymade? It is not merely an Everyday object graced with



Relations of Absence, 1981

Poster and marker

121.9 × 396 cm (48 × 156 in.)

the appellation of “art” by an artist, gallery, or museum. When Duchamp selected a urinal out of the enormous pool of utilitarian objects, signed it “R. Mutt,” and displayed it as sculpture, this sequence of decisions revealed a sophisticated understanding of the function of institutional context as a crucial component of how art, in traditional terms, becomes a privileged domain supposedly removed from the precincts of the everyday and the ordinary. In other words, Duchamp revealed the degree to which any definition of art must take into account the institution (museum, gallery, exhibition catalogue) that either grants or denies an object status as a privileged cultural artifact. Furthermore, Duchamp underscored the perpetually changing system of aesthetic “laws” that permits only certain types of aesthetic configurations into the cultural vanguard. The urinal became canonized as “art” only when it was placed within an institutional frame.

In Surrealist parlance, the found or scavenged “object of everyday use” became a fetish to artists who held a fascination for extra-aesthetic visual and material languages. For some artists in the latter part of this century, mass culture—the visual lexicon of pop culture and mass media—became the locus of fetishistic desire. Julia Wachtel’s art has

strong connections—and complicity—with the visual language of commodity culture, but she uses that connection in a way that indicates critical reflection through intersecting strategies of appropriation, replication, reconfiguration, juxtaposition, and recontextualization.

To understand the correlation between the Duchamp's strategy of the Readymade and subsequent practices that utilize the vernacular of mass culture as a readymade language, we must turn to the work and rhetorical position of Andy Warhol. Although the influence of Duchamp permeated the practices of various European and American artists during the 1950s and 1960s, it is with Warhol that the more radical departure is accomplished—beyond Rauschenburg's notion to bridge the gap between art and life. For Warhol, the canvas (or the discipline of painting) was meant to be indistinguishable from—or exist on the same plane as—a chair or a commercial poster. The art itself should be considered as the everyday.

It is evident that for Warhol and other so-called Pop artists the everyday meant the new visual languages and iconography of mass culture: advertising and mass media imagery, movie stills, and so on. Yet, according to Warhol, while art should signify the everyday, that is not what it really *is*: that would confuse the object and its meaning. And so what emerges is a paradoxical bind: art can neither be absorbed into the everyday (painting = ordinary object), nor completely grasp the everyday per se (the depiction of ordinary object on canvas = the everyday). The notion of “everydayness”—as understood in relation to the art object and the non-art, ordinary object—is ultimately predicated upon an understanding of the institutional context in which the object appears. This is true whether we are speaking of Duchamp's urinal, Jeff Koons's stainless steel bunny, Haim Steinbach's commodity object display shelves, or Julia Wachtel's cartoon characters. In other words, it is the framework of institutionalized high-culture that provides the enclave within which art may seek to assume the guise of its “other”: the everyday. Yet it is this type of art practice that reveals a subjectivity fascinated by a technical world that denies it, fixated on the materiality and materialism of that world.

This fascination with the visual language of mass culture has always been present in Julia Wachtel's art. In certain respects, like other artists' work of her generation, Wachtel's paintings suggest a self-consciousness about the degree to which any cultural production that takes as its source of vocabulary the supposedly debased iconography of mass culture implies an ambivalent position between critical engagement and unencumbered integration (and, by extension, an intrinsically affirmative stance). Wachtel's paintings enter into a visual-language game wherein the appro-

priated vernacular of mass culture is illustrated, simulated, replicated, altered, and parodied. The logic of this language is disturbed just enough to provoke a meditation upon the conditions of meaning intrinsic to that vernacular.

In the early 1980s, Wachtel produced a series of works that would inaugurate one of the artist's central concerns: how subjectivity (i.e., the psychology of the individual) is constructed, reconstructed, or even fragmented in relation to the panoply of images which bombard perception in this "society of the spectacle." In acts of wantonly literal appropriation, Wachtel utilized commercially available posters of movie and television stars, pin-up girls, political figures, and pop music icons, among other related images in a presentational strategy based upon repetition and juxtaposition. While it is appropriate to observe that Wachtel's method was in a general sense derived from Warhol's strategy (a method similarly redeployed by certain of the "Pictures" artists such as Sherrie Levine, who directed her appropriative gaze toward the ready-made language of art historical representations), she seems more interested in how such images of the entertainment industry seduce—or conversely alienate—the desires of the viewer. This is revealed through the inscription in black marker of human figures in silhouette over particular quadrants of the overall series of images. In *Relations of Absence* (1981), for example, a number of posters—including a John Travolta promo portrait, a topless pin-up girl, a picture of Mussolini—are placed side-by-side in a deceptively arbitrary organization of repetition and alternation. The posters provide the backdrop for what appears to be a male and a female figure. The scale of these silhouetted figures appear to be average human scale in relation to the posters. This suggests that we as viewers necessarily insert ourselves into the pictorial space articulated by the surrogates for the figures, which function as symbols of a desirous projection from the Real into the Imaginary. In a sense, Wachtel implies that the popular culture industry produces and disseminates images that not only construct fantasies for leisure-time distraction, but more significantly as signs of a substitute world that may have become indistinguishable from the Real it was designed to be a substitute for.

In 1983, Wachtel began to shift the focus of her method of appropriation towards another realm of mass culture. Cartoon figures selected from the domain of commercial greeting cards would begin to assume a central role in Wachtel's vocabulary. More recently she has actually hired cartoonists to develop new characters. The works begun around 1983 also are indicative of Wachtel's decision to utilize the discipline of painting as the framework within which the appropriated image is translated into an aesthetic context. The production of each of these works requires preliminary drawings, followed by the projection of the blown-up "adjusted readymade" cartoon image onto the canvas. This sketch functions as a guide for final articulation in paint. It is important to recognize that although Wachtel attempts to produce an exact replication of each cartoon, she is nevertheless engaged in a method of painting that will always



Untitled, 1981
Posters, paint, and marker
101.6 × 342.9 cm (40 × 135 in.)

involve the presence of the hand, however mediated. This establishes a compelling situation: the conventional values and techniques of painting are necessarily reconfigured as they are used in the rendering of de-based, vulgar imagery.

By recycling ludicrous cartoon characters, Wachtel manages to underscore their latent function as symbols of a particular representation of the human condition within the context of late-capitalist society. These characters become indices for particular psychological conditions: Their exaggerated expressions of pleasure, pain, anger, and confusion, among

other emotional states, parody an array of desublimated psychological conditions. It is almost as if the cartoon characters, whose actual function is primarily entertainment-oriented, become cyphers designed to counter repression through comic means. Ironically the laughter that these figures generate may only facilitate other levels of repression and sublimation. By extracting and isolating specific types of cartoon characters, Wachtel is able to identify particular manifestations of sex and gender codes and identification which are easily glossed over at first glance. In other words, Wachtel's cartoon figures become symbolic of particular social identities. For instance, in a work from 1983 entitled *Love Thing* Wachtel examined the way in which "feminine sexuality" is constructed through cartoon representations. On the left side of the painting stands a typical parody of a Native American (perhaps a stereotypical "squaw") who winces in pain from an arrow shot in the rear end. The right side of the composition features another stereotype—an idealized, blond-haired, blue-eyed WASP woman who stands in a peculiar butt-protruding posture and holds a pair of scissors in a potentially threatening manner. Here, Wachtel used images out of the vernacular of mass culture so as to construct a biting social commentary and allegory on the continued power and perpetuation of racial and gender stereotypes.

During the mid-1980s, Wachtel introduced another type of imagery into her lexicon of greeting-card cartoon figures: representations of statuary and masks reproduced from various sources of so-called "primitive" cultures. There is something quite logical in this choice, since in certain respects these icons—already dehistoricized as image-artifacts—function as indices of cultural stereotypes just as the cartoon figures do. When these two image systems are juxtaposed, they do not produce a radically dichotomous or contradictory set of meanings; rather, a peculiarly artificial leveling off of cultural differences occurs in this conflation of disparate cultural images. Indeed, it is as if Wachtel is manufacturing a false archaeology of cultural artifacts, permitting difference to disappear behind homological resemblance.

In *Skin Deep* (1985) the top section of this two-panel painting is comprised of two images of primitive masks, placed one above the other (they appear to represent female physiognomies). The lower panel is composed of two side-by-side images: a cartoon caricature of a begging dog with wagging tongue on the left, and a cartoon of yet another stereotypical blonde WASP woman on the right. The juxtaposition of such imagery, coupled with the connotations of the title *Skin Deep*, conveys a sense that the reproductive and reprographic mechanisms of mass culture have the power not only to reduce historical and cultural difference down to the interplay of reified signs, but also to insinuate the pictorial sign of



Love Thing, 1983
Acrylic on canvas
243.8 × 162.6 cm (96 × 64 in.)

stereotype as an index of normative cultural values (this society's tendency to privilege sameness, for example). This painting also demonstrates Wachtel's abiding interest in decoding the cultural "constructions" of femininity as these constructions are insinuated through debased representations.

Even though the images appropriated by Wachtel were originally utilized for entertainment, her work begins to unveil the "ideology of entertainment," which has been created by the mass culture of our society so as to distract the individual from daily problems, neuroses, and so on. But take a long look at these cartoon characters: if anything, they seem to exhibit the characteristics of extreme, even pathological, states of mind not unlike certain symptoms associated with schizophrenia. If these characters are meant to function as fun-house mirrorings of our absurd human condition, Wachtel is suggesting that the reflection is no laughing matter, that behind every banal representation is an indication of social ideology that may be more disturbing than comedic in its implications about how we supposedly see ourselves (or about how those who control these representations view us.)

In the "Emotional Appeal" series from 1986, Wachtel produced a group of paintings comprised of single images of both the greeting-card derived cartoon characters and primitive idols displayed in an alternating sequence (cartoon figures followed by primitive figure, and so on). Wachtel offered a perversely humorous admixture of prototypical emotional states exaggerated into an almost obscene overload of emotive excess; this excess connotes a level of hyperartificiality that is disconcerting.

During 1987 and 1988, Wachtel began to shift her work in a subtly different direction, indicating a fixation on the entertainment industry. These works examined the condition of stardom and celebrity status with a tongue-in-cheek style of social critique. Unlike her early poster works, which also featured figures from television or cinema, these paintings attempt to reveal the pathetic nature of the star system by selecting images that emphasize the degree to which a celebrity is but a construction of various forces at work within the entertainment industry. In a work such as *Encore* (1988), we are presented with a rather hilarious, yet disturbing pictorial rendezvous of two types of comic figures. The painting contains two identical images of the comedian Tim Conway in a ridiculous dwarf costume holding an impossibly huge, fake, phallus-like banana over his shoulder. These images frame a squat, dwarf-like cartoon character whose mouth is agape and whose arms stretch wide apart—a combination of facial expression and bodily posture that communicates excessive adulation for Conway's just-completed comedic performance. Conway's own facial expression communicates the self-conscious transition from invented, fictional character back to the condition of selfhood; the ambiguity suggested in the aforementioned process of reestablishing identity described above is also present here. But there is something else in Conway's expression which betrays, in however sublimated a fashion, a sense of resignation to—or perhaps entrapment within—the machinery of the entertainment industry. With the over-sized banana propped up on his shoulder, Conway becomes the court jester, emasculated and doomed to recycle himself as an *abject* object of entertainment, while the cartoon homonucleus assumes the double role of a surrogate master of ceremonies and an ecstatic, insatiable spectator—screaming out for more satisfaction.

The willful admixture of criticality and ambivalence—always important in Wachtel's work—acquires a different significance in the artist's most recent "Landscape" series, begun in 1989. In these works, Wachtel inserts cartoon characters into the "readymade" lexicon of mainstream magazine and newspaper photographic images which document the contemporary socio-political landscape. In these works the artist utilizes cartoon figures as symbolic commentators on the religious, cultural, ideological, political issues that are inscribed on the silk-screen painted images. Here, Wachtel turns her sights upon the way in which political and social events automatically become injected into—and therefore transvalued by—the processes of the mass media system. Documentation becomes a means to construct a spectacle for the widest

possible dissemination and consumption. Wachtel establishes intersections between cartoon figures and the “universal” language of news media images in the “Landscapes” series. The ensuing juxtapositions produce a hybrid “landscape” where the cartoon characters underscore the position of Wachtel, who equivocates between imposing moral or didactic political/ideological critique and assuming a position of ambivalence. These cartoon figures—whether a kneeling hippy-type inserted into a massive scene of Muslim prayer in *Landscape No. 1 (prayer)*, or a doubled image of a nose-picking character incorporated into what appears to be an industrial site in *Landscape No. 8 (natural resources)*—subvert the neutrality of the appropriated documentary images around them. The expressions and postures of the cartoons compel the viewer to reexamine his or her relationship to “the Real” as constructed through the supposed objectivity of the news media.

In *Landscape No. 2 (aerobics)*, the cartoon figure used in *Landscape No. 1 (prayer)*—the ecstatic hippy—reappears amidst an image of four women whose bodies are postured as if leading a calisthenic exercise. The women face a large, outdoor public space, and it seems as if they are either engaged in some type of ritual performance, or are leading an enormous, spectacular aerobics class. By choosing this ambiguous image, and then inserting a cartoon figure in an extreme act of genuflection, Wachtel alludes to the religion of the body which is predominant within certain western cultural and ideological frameworks. Thus the juxtaposition between *Landscape No. 1* and *Landscape No. 2* is indicative of the real and symbolic correlations and contradictions that exist between disparate social formations wherein desire is always constructed through the order of the body. Yet in other works from the series, Wachtel injects the presence of more immediately identifiable socio-political situations. *Landscape No. 5 (Wall)* features an image of people gathered at the Berlin Wall. This scene is rudely interrupted by a cartoon figure—mouth-gape, arms frenetically waving, cross-eyed to the point of being a cyclops—who appears in a jagged-edged yellow bubble superimposed over an intense red field. (These colors balance off in compositional and coloristic terms the crossed-out hammer and sickle in the news media image.) It would seem that the artist is attempting to underscore the degree to which mass-media images of social and political transformations automatically become fodder for the creation of a *spectacle of the political*.

But just as the cartoon characters are ultimately imaginary projections of a desire for a perversely compensatory, substitutional, and transference-like identification with a figure of desublimated expression, the subversions which they engender occur primarily on the imaginary level of an image-saturated landscape in which the the so-called “real” and its multiple representations vie for a privileged position. In Julia Wachtel’s paintings, the process of decoding the image-world of popular culture and mass media facilitates the possibility of a social critique linked inexorably with the pleasures of entertainment.





Installation of the "Emotional Appeal" series at the Diane Brown Gallery, New York, in 1987.



horn player, 1986 (cat. 1)
Oil on canvas
127 × 86.3 cm (50 × 34 in.)



mouse, 1986 (cat. 2)
Oil on canvas
127 × 68.5 cm (50 × 27 in.)



speechless, 1986 (cat. 3)
Oil on canvas
127 × 71.1 cm (50 × 27 in.)



anthropo, 1986 (cat. 4)
Oil on canvas
127 × 68.5 (50 × 27 in.)



sugar baby, 1986 (cat. 6)
Oil on canvas
127 × 66 cm (50 × 26 in.)



dead weight, 1986 (cat. 7)
Oil on canvas
127 × 66 cm (50 × 26 in.)



knot, 1986 (cat. 9)
Oil on canvas
121 × 78.7 cm (50 × 31 in.)



idol, 1986 (cat. 10)
Oil on canvas
127 × 66 cm (50 × 26 in.)



big head, 1986 (cat. 11)
Oil on canvas
127 × 91.4 cm (50 × 36 in.)



painted figure, 1986 (cat. 12)
Oil on canvas
127 × 83.8 cm (50 × 33 in.)

C A R T O O N E M O T I O N S

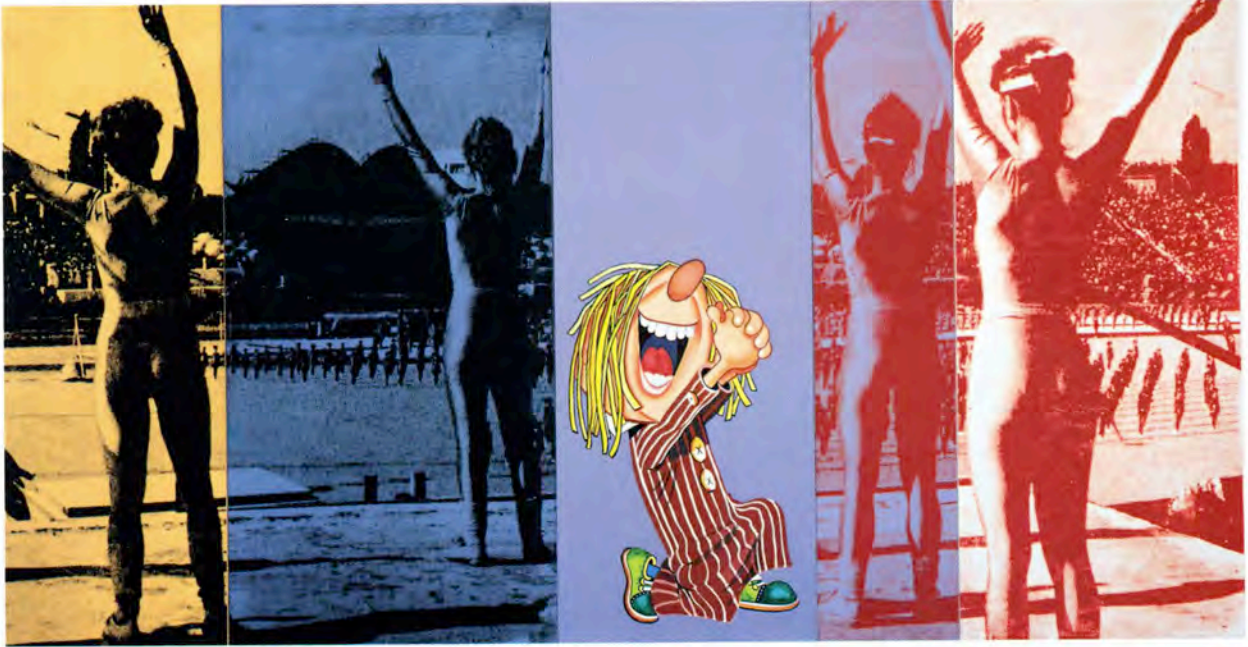
LYNNE WARREN

Julia Wachtel's work has the quite intriguing quality of providing instant impact, mainly due to the brightly colored, buffoonish cartoon figures it features, and of also provoking a disquieting, vacant feeling, paradoxically enough—yet not at all paradoxically—because of those same cartoon figures. Yet unlike much work that viewers may find initially off-putting, the very recognizability and perverse attractiveness of Wachtel's cartoon figures quickly turns distress into curiosity. Much like a compelling, but half-remembered dream, the cartoons—and thus the paintings—simultaneously are crystal clear yet hard to grab onto, familiar and foreign, known through-and-through and freshly exotic because they float free of the analysis, hype, and merchandising overkill that most popular culture icons suffer in the current climate.

And these works also seem to fit right in with the appropriators, image scavengers, and post-Conceptualists who have dominated, especially in the critical discourse, the art world in the past decade. But unlike those artists with whom she has often been grouped, Wachtel has chosen subject matter that elicits an emotional response. Although her paintings can be analyzed in light of the critique of the media, of American society, of the Western tradition itself that the post-Conceptualists focus on, the strength and, more important, durability of Wachtel's art rests on her interest in human emotion. While Wachtel's art may seem to be doing something thought long ago to have been put to rest—testing



Landscape No. 5 (Wall), 1990 (cat. 16)
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 351.7 cm (60 × 138½ in.)



Landscape No. 2 (aerobics), 1989 (cat. 13)
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 292.1 cm (60 × 115 in.)

aesthetic boundaries—it is in fact doing something that in this day and age is considerably more daring: testing the limits of emotional expression in contemporary art. Wachtel's paintings fly in the face not only of the long-held myth that art should deal with sublime emotions (a product of art's emergence from the religious tradition), but also the more recent myth that art should not deal with emotion at all (a notion rising out of Minimal and Conceptual art and embraced with gusto by Wachtel's contemporaries).

Julia Wachtel's method of dealing with her subject matter is so simple and direct that it is almost elusive to us, accustomed as we are after decades of difficult and obscure art to searching mightily for meaning. Recognizing that we live in a society which disdains the honest display of emotion and has developed elaborate techniques to circumscribe and defuse both its public and private expression, Wachtel uses her cartoons as choruses of stylized, extreme emotion. Like the choruses of Greek tragedy, which directly address the audience to elucidate and comment upon the complexities and actions of the noble hero, Wachtel's cartoon characters directly engage the viewer to comment upon the whole uneasy situation of the discipline of painting itself today.



Landscape No. 6 (shopping), 1990
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 297.1 cm (60 × 117 in.)

Wachtel's paintings can accomplish this effect because somehow—almost magically—these gargoylish cartoons resist becoming yet another gentrified resident of the pantheon of images with which contemporary art is rife. These irritating figures—popular with the middle class in the 1960s and 1970s, when they were seen on greeting cards, bar supplies, and T-shirts—are not ironic, they are not “deconstructed,” they do not allude to anything. They are simply what they appear to be—grotesque, stereotypical displays of emotion. In the end, the viewer, by being unable to digest those idiotic cartoons, is made to realize that what is “in bad taste” is not the cartoons, but the emotions they stand for.

Julia Wachtel came of age as an artist in a decade when painting was for all intents and purposes considered “dead” as an instrument of advanced art, as it had been so declared not only in the late 1960s by Formalist critics, but in the 1910s by Marcel Duchamp and the Dada artists. But in the 1980s we all knew better than to make this proclamation boldly and out loud just in case painting once again broke through to the aesthetic inner sanctum, as it had an irritating way of doing throughout the 20th century. There definitely was tacit agreement, however, that advanced art could not utilize such a heavily burdened, culturally sus-



Landscape No. 3 (history), 1989 (cat. 14)
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 299.7 cm (60 × 118 in.)

pect medium as canvas and paint. For one thing, it is hard to paint and be removed, dispassionate, and philosophical, the required stance of an artist in the 1980s—although some artists did so by utilizing crude draftsmanship and heavy doses of irony and deconstructive philosophy to make the point that their works on canvas were not to be taken strictly as paintings. The prevailing thought was that the hand and the idiosyncratic marks it made had to be taken out of the process of art making, and the preferred methods were photomechanical as well as assemblages of manufactured or found objects.

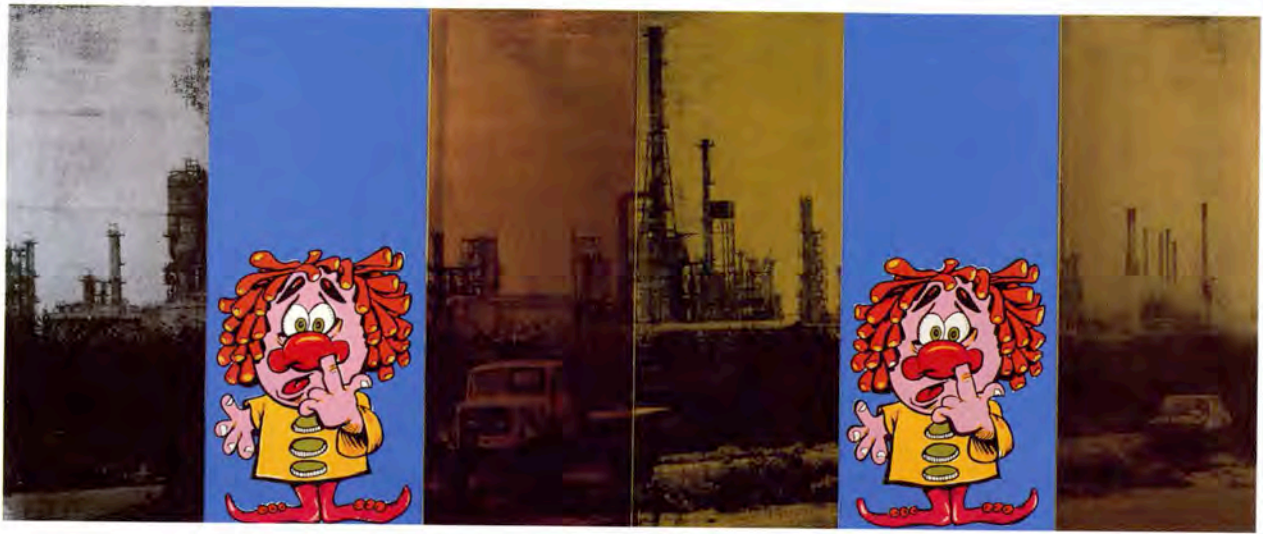
Wachtel fashioned her unique style out of a heavily sculptural and conceptual background, which included study with such artists as Haim Steinbach at Middlebury College, Vito Acconci and Joseph Kosuth at New York's School of Visual Arts, and Yvonne Rainer at the Whitney Independent Study Program. She discovered early on, however, that it was emotion that interested her, and in the mid-1980s Wachtel discovered that the subjective medium of painting was the ideal one to explore this subject matter. It takes only the minor thought exercise of imagining Wachtel's paintings as color photographs mounted flat on board to understand this point. Imagined so, the imagery becomes self-mocking: idiotic cartoons juxtaposed with primitive—a culturally loaded and entirely



Landscape No. 4 (inside and outside), 1990 (cat. 15)
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 330.2 cm (60 × 130 in.)

suspect word—idols and figurines. Interestingly, the poignancy and power that Wachtel's works do undeniably hold spring entirely from their having been created from paint.

Wachtel's sophisticated analysis of the difficulty of human emotion in our society was summed up after several years of work in the series "Emotional Appeal" (1986). The series title, taken quite straightforwardly (which is admittedly hard to do given the instant reflex of irony most viewers of contemporary art have been trained to display) sets up a panoply of bathetic emotions—from the wrung-dry despair of *horn player* to the paralyzed fear of *knot*—juxtaposed with strangely mute representations of figurines from such cultures as Mayan and Toltec. These figurines are all more or less familiar—perhaps we've seen them as illustrations in art history texts—and they provide a convenient index of what we think of as our "primitive heritage." What might not be apparent to the contemporary viewer is that these figurines also provide an index of subtle, important human emotions. Do these figures have "emotional appeal"? Or is the fact that they do not the "emotional appeal"? Is the emotional appeal a cry of anguish that we buried our expression (and thus comprehension) of emotion so deep that its subtle display escapes us, and its outrageous display—the cartoons—is all we have left?



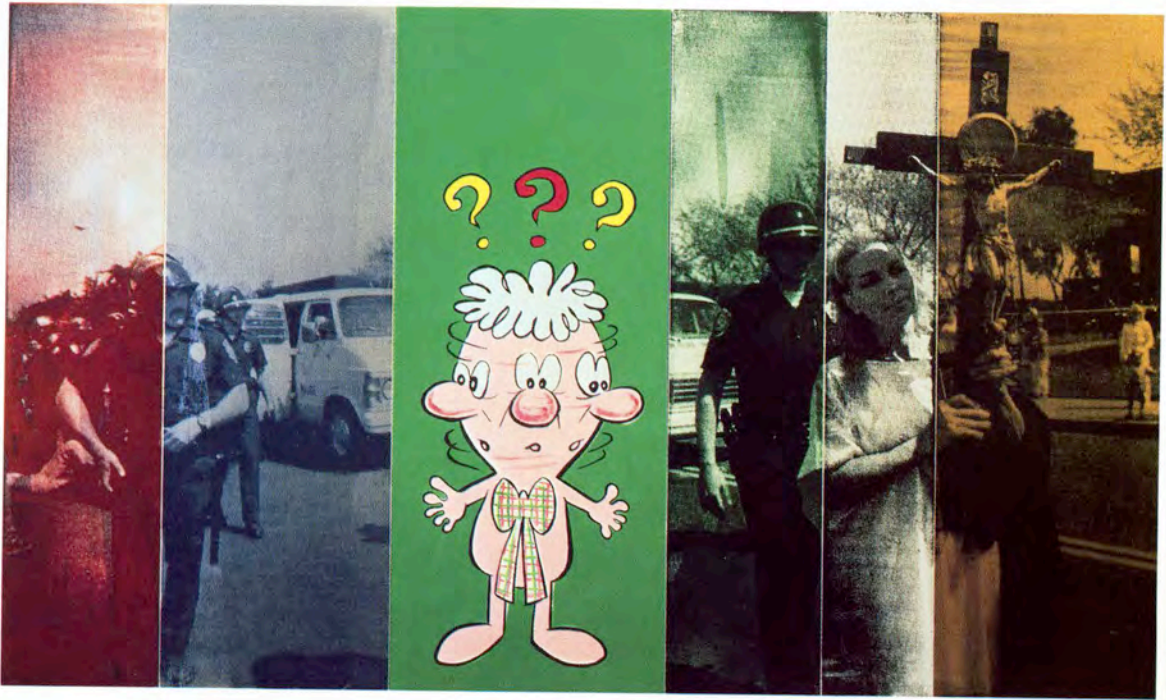
Landscape No. 8 (natural resources), 1990
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 365.7 cm (60 × 144 in.)

As a summation of an important body of work, “Emotional Appeal” is dazzling, and points the way to a new body of paintings, titled “Landscapes,” that delve deeper and more painfully into modern man’s circumscribed and repressed emotional existence. The same cartoon figures are utilized, but they now appear against silk-screened versions of news photos of places and events that are symbols of socio-political forces both somber and mild: the Berlin Wall, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, an aerobics exercise class. The silk-screened images both provide a pointed reference to Pop art, specifically to Andy Warhol’s characteristic use of the silk-screen process to create paintings and the entire Warholian notion of emotional sterility in art, as well as open up the illusionistic space of the canvas. There is now foreground and background: In short, there is now a landscape. In these works the cartoons become ever more obvious as “thought balloons,” commenting upon, punctuating, even disrupting the “reality” of the realistic silk-screened image. In addition, the paintings’ vertical human scale (five feet) and great length (up to almost 12 feet) provides a visual “wrap” and invites viewers to enter their space.

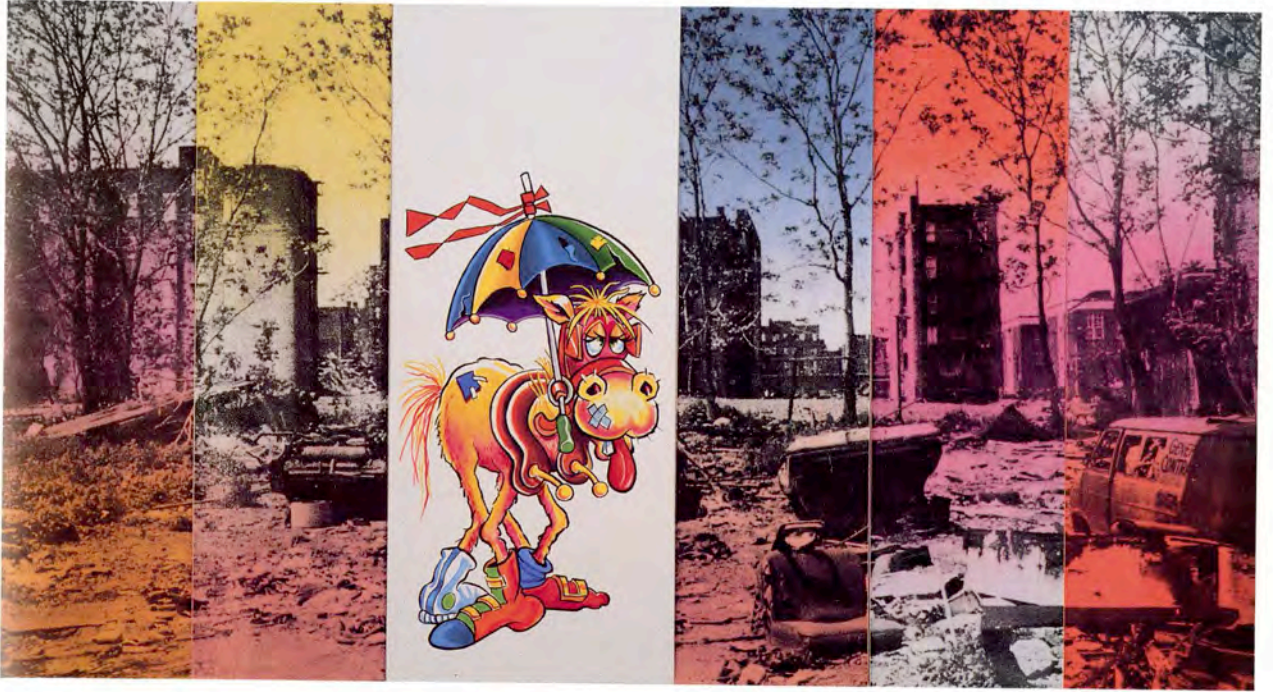
In choosing to be painter who does not dwell on the craft of painting (no one would mistake Wachtel for a Matisse or a Picasso), but who instead uses painting’s emotional heritage to express her observations about the condition of being human in our increasingly inhuman world, Wachtel has staked out a unique and valuable territory. The straightforwardness and alacrity of her works, and her own emotional honesty and sensitivity within an idiom that has gone to great lengths to glorify its intellectual processes and to bury its heart, is refreshing. It is also nothing less than courageous.



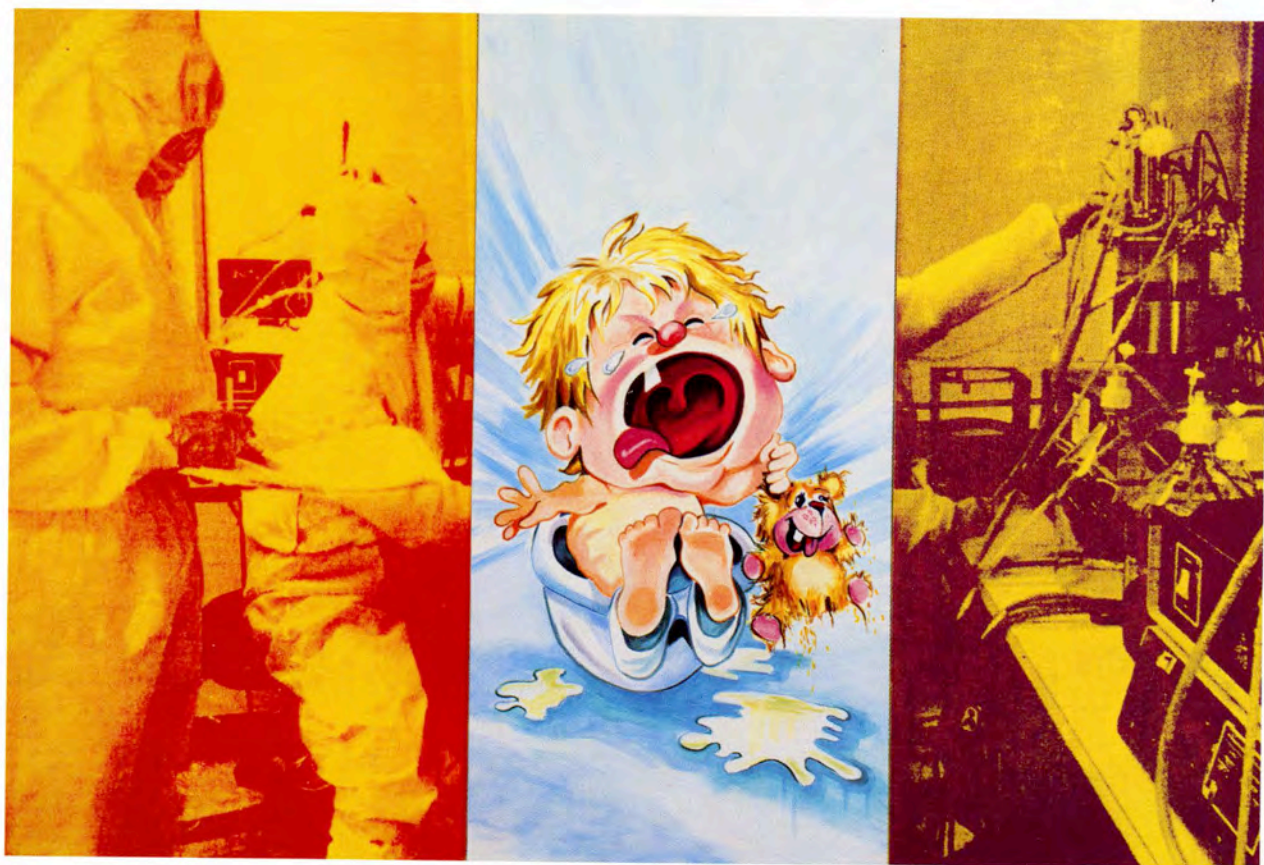
Landscape No. 12 (road), 1990
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
121 × 259 cm (48 × 102 in.)



Landscape No. 7 (?), 1990
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 258.4 cm (60 × 101¼ in.)



Landscape No. 13 (backyard), 1990
Oil, acrylic, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 280.6 cm (60 × 110½ in.)



Landscape No. 9 (creation), 1990
Oil, flashe, lacquer ink on canvas
152.4 × 226 cm (60 × 89 in.)

Catalogue of the
Exhibition

J U L I A W A C H T E L

From the series "Emotional Appeal"
(All works are oil on canvas, and are lent by the
artist unless otherwise noted. Works are
presented in the order they were displayed in
their first showing as a complete series.)

1.
horn player, 1986
127 × 86.3 cm (50 × 34 in.)
2.
mouse, 1986
127 × 68.5 cm (50 × 27 in.)
Private collection, New York
3.
speechless, 1986
127 × 71.1 cm (50 × 28 in.)
4.
anthropo, 1986
127 × 68.5 cm (50 × 27 in.)
The Progressive Corporation
Mayfield Heights, Ohio
5.
emcee, 1986
127 × 66 cm (50 × 26 in.)
6.
sugar baby, 1986
127 × 66 cm (50 × 26 in.)
7.
dead weight, 1986
127 × 66 cm (50 × 26 in.)
Lent by the artist, courtesy of
Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio
8.
feathered serpent, 1986
127 × 86.3 cm (50 × 34 in.)

9.

knot, 1986

121 × 78.7 cm (50 × 31 in.)

The Progressive Corporation

Mayfield Heights, Ohio

10.

idol, 1986

127 × 66 cm (50 × 26 in.)

Lent by Penny and David McCall, New York

11.

big head, 1986

127 × 91.4 cm (50 × 36 in.)

Collection Collins + Milazzo, New York

12.

painted figure, 1986

127 × 83.8 cm (50 × 33 in.)

From the "Landscapes" series:

(All works are oil, flashe,
and lacquer ink on canvas.)

13.

Landscape No. 2 (aerobics), 1989

152.4 × 292.1 cm (60 × 115 in.)

Lent by Martin and Janet Blinder

Beverly Hills, California

14.

Landscape No. 3 (history), 1989

152.4 × 299.7 cm (60 × 118 in.)

Collection of Robert Shiffler

Greenville, Ohio

15.

Landscape No. 4 (inside and outside), 1990

152.4 × 330.2 cm (60 × 130 in.)

Lent by the artist, courtesy of

Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio

16.

Landscape No. 5 (Wall), 1990

152.4 × 351.7 cm (60 × 138½ in.)

Lent by Pierre Huber, Geneva, Switzerland

Biography

J U L I A W A C H T E L

1956

Born in New York

Education

1974-77

Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont

1978

School of Visual Arts, New York

1979

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
Independent Study Program

One-Person Exhibitions

1981

Fashion Moda, Bronx, New York, "Relations of
Absence"

1983

C.U.N.Y. Graduate Center Mall, New York,
"Social Consequences" (collaboration with
Haim Steinbach)

1984

Nature Morte Gallery, New York

1985

Diane Brown Gallery, New York
Nature Morte Gallery, New York

1987

Diane Brown Gallery, New York

1988

Diane Brown Gallery, New York
Nature Morte Gallery, New York

1989

Greenville County Art Museum, Greenville,
North Carolina
Diane Brown Gallery, New York (exh. cat.)

1990

Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio
Galerie Georges-Philippe Vallois, Paris, "Julia
Wachtel" and "Peter Nagy"

1991

Galerie Faust, Geneva, Switzerland, "Julia
Wachtel" and "Haim Steinbach"

Selected Group Exhibitions

1979

Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1,
Long Island City, New York, "Film
and Sound Installation"

1981

Bus System, New York, Group Material,
"M5 Show"

Artists Space, New York, "Selections" (exh. cat.)
New York, Group Material, "Gender Show"

1982

The Drawing Center, New York, "Fifth
Anniversary Exhibition" (exh. cat.)

1983

Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Buffalo,
New York, "Richard Armijo, G. Roger
Denson, et al." (exh. cat.)

Brooklyn, New York, "Terminal Show/Preparing
for War"

Subway Ad Spaces, New York, Group Material,
"Subculture"

Latino Space, Group Material, "Revolutionary
High Art"

1984

University Art Museum, University of California
at Santa Barbara, "Neo York: Report on a
Phenomenon" (exh. cat.)

L.A.C.E. Gallery, Los Angeles, "Emblem"

Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1, Long
Island City, New York, Group Material,
"Timeline of Intervention in Central America"

Artists Space, New York, "Hundreds of
Drawings"

Center Gallery, Bucknell University, Lewisburg,
Pennsylvania; Sardoni Art Gallery, Wilkes
College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania,
"Contemporary Perspectives"

1985

Artists Space, New York, "Split Vision"
(exh. cat.)

Daniel Newburg Gallery, New York, "Persona
Non Grata"

Texas Gallery, Houston, "Infotainment"
(exh. cat.) (traveled to Rhona Hoffman
Gallery, Chicago; Vanguard Gallery,
Philadelphia; Aspen Art Museum, Aspen,
Colorado; Galerie Maria Bonk, Cologne, West
Germany; De Selby Gallery, Amsterdam, the
Netherlands; Galerie Montenay Del Sol, Paris)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,
"1985 Biennial Exhibition," as a part of Group
Material "Americana" (exh. cat.)

Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal, Canada,
"East Village"

1986

S. L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto, Canada,
"Ultrasurd" (exh. cat.)

American Fine Arts Co., Colin de Land Fine Art,
New York

Bess Cutler Gallery, New York, "When Attitudes
Become Form"

Bard College, Annadale-on-Hudson, New York,
"The Ready Made Painted"

Metro Pictures, New York

Nature Morte Gallery, New York

1987

Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, "Nothing
Sacred"

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Los Angeles, "Avant-Garde in the
Eighties" (exh. cat.)

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art,
Ridgefield, Connecticut, "Post-Abstract
Abstraction" (exh. cat.)

Galerie Pierre Huber, Geneva, Switzerland,
"The Art of the Real" (exh. cat.)

Knight Gallery, Charlotte, North Carolina,
"Romance"

Institute of Contemporary Art, London, "Comic
Iconoclasm"

Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University/
C. W. Post Campus, Greenvale, New York,
"Perverted by Language" (exh. cat.)

Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York, "Monsters:
The Phenomena of Dispassion"

1988

Hans Meyer Gallery, Düsseldorf, Germany,
“Works Concepts Processes Situation
Information” (exh. cat.)

Graeme Murray Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland
121 Art Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium

Scott Hanson Gallery, New York, “Media Post-
Media” (exh. cat.)

The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York,
“Appropriation and Syntax: The Uses of
Photography in Contemporary Art”

Scott Hanson Gallery, New York

1989

Turon Travel, Inc., New York, “JET LAG”

Achim Kubinski, Stuttgart, West Germany (exh.
cat.)

Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago, “Ian Hamilton
Finlay, Mitchell Kane, Julie Wachtel”

Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, New Jersey,
“The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One”

The School of Visual Arts Gallery, New York,
“Dream Reality” (exh. cat.)

1990

Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, “Stendahl
Syndrome: The Cure”

Le Consortium, Dijon, France

Simon Watson Gallery, New York, “Total Metal”

Massimo Audiello Gallery, “The Last Laugh”

Wright State University, the University Art
Galleries, “Assembled: Works of Art Using
Photography as a Construction Element” (exh.
cat.)

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- The Paris Review* 99 (Spring 1986): frontispiece (ill.).
- Cameron, Dan. "Report from the Front." *Arts Magazine* 60, 10 (Summer 1986): 93 (ill.).
- Snowdon, Lynn. "Under the Shadow of Barbie's Breasts: Three Women Deal with 60's Residue." *The East Village Eye*, June 1986, p. 30.
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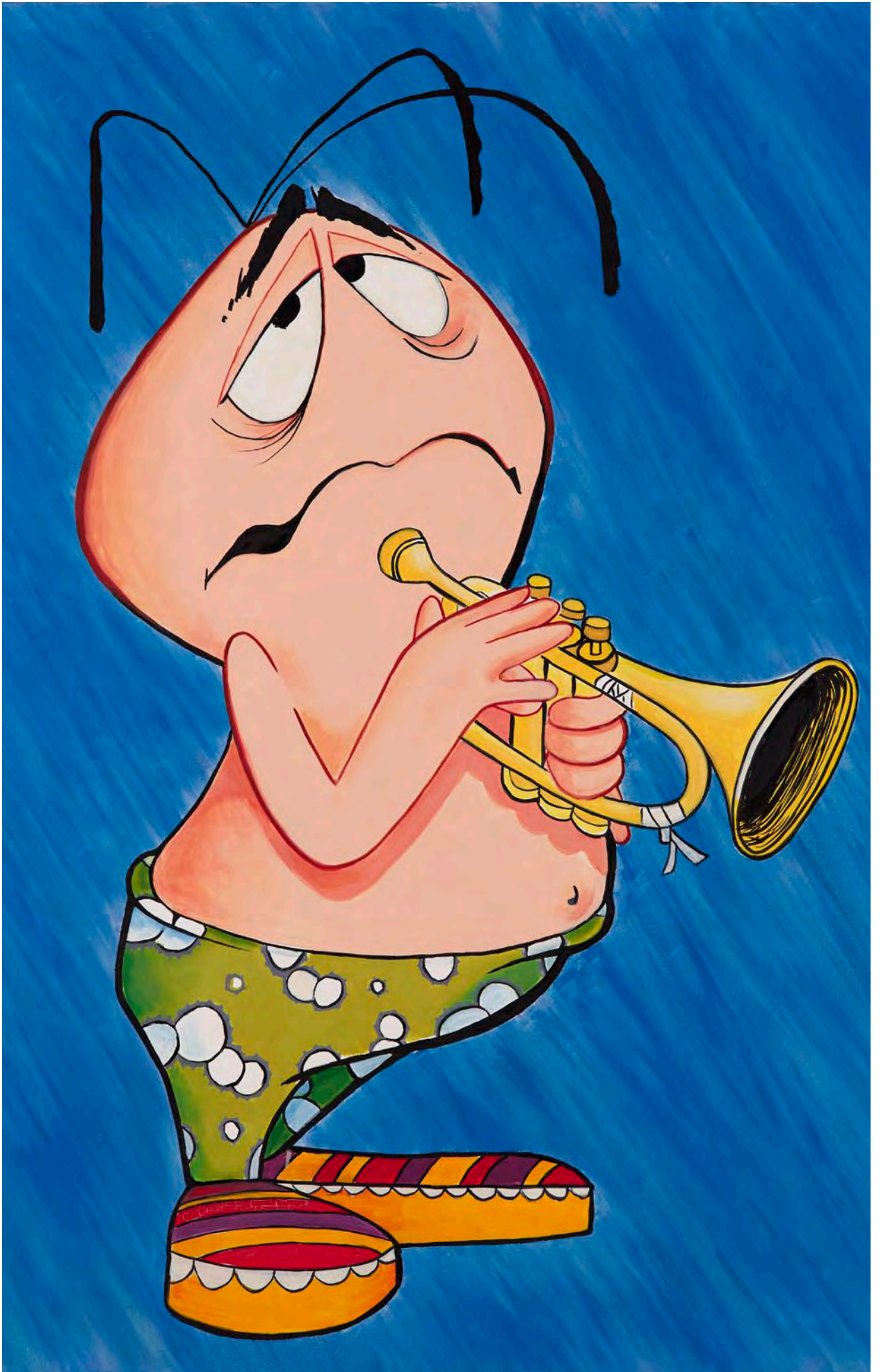


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Artist creates world of odd characters MCA examines work of Julia Wachtel

Author(s): Garrett Holg **Date:** April 7, 1991 **Page:** 4 **Section:** SHOW

It's no secret that the art world tends to take itself too seriously at times. Marcel Duchamp was saying as much in 1917 when he turned a urinal upside down, signed it with the name R. Mutt and tried to exhibit it with the Society for Independent Artists under the title of "Fountain."

Pop artists did pretty much the same thing in the early 1960s. Roy Lichtenstein lifted individual comic frames out of the Sunday funnies, enlarged them to easel or mural size and took them uptown to show off in New York's galleries. Andy Warhol shopped for his Brillo boxes and soup cans at the grocery store. The legacy of these and other artists who have borrowed from everyday life and turned it into art is very much in evidence in the work of New York-based artist **Julia Wachtel**. Her penchant is for those wacky, oddly shaped little characters in garishly colored costumes who wish us good cheer on holidays, console us with get-well wishes when we're sick and taunt us mercilessly on our getting one year older. In her work, she pairs these kitschy greeting card caricatures with renderings of primitive artifacts or stark photographic images taken from newspapers and magazines. The result is work that is at once rather obnoxious and sappy, yet also curiously engaging.

Sixteen of Wachtel's works, dating from 1986 to 1990, are on view through May 13 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 237 E. Ontario. The exhibition, which marks the artist's first one-person museum showing, also represents the 41st offering in the MCA's superb, 11-year-old "Options" series.

Born in New York in 1956, Wachtel has a background primarily in sculptural and conceptual art. Her resume boasts such luminaries as Haim Steinbach, Vitto Acconci, Joseph Kosuth and Yvonne Rainer as teachers. Because she uses images culled from mass culture, her work has been frequently, yet somewhat wrongly, lumped together with that of the appropriators of the past decade.

Unlike those artists, however, as MCA associate curator and the show's organizer, Lynne Warren, points out in her catalog essay, "Wachtel has chosen subject matter that elicits an emotional response. Although her paintings can be analyzed in light of the critique of the media, of American society, of the Western tradition itself that the post-Conceptualists focus on, the strength and, more important, durability of Wachtel's art rests on her interest in human emotion."

The artist's early work consisted of single rows of posters featuring movie stars, rock musicians, pinups and politicians over which she superimposed the silhouettes of human figures drawn in black marking pen. She first used humorous cartoon figures in 1983. Some openly commented on the practices of sexual and social stereotyping. By the mid-1980s, she was combining her tacky, outrageous cartoon characters with the painted renderings of primitive artifacts resonant with history and veiled meanings.

For this exhibit, Wachtel's "Emotional Appeal" series was installed exactly as it had been for a 1987 show at New York's Diane Brown Gallery. Consisting of 12 separate canvases placed in a straight line, each panel alternates between an image of a cartoon figure and an image of a primitive artifact. In it, a dopey-looking little guy with a big head and a crooked one-tooth grin stands beside a fearsome painted figure. At the same time, a buglike character with droopy eyes and a bandaged trumpet faces an oracular mouse and an anxious guy twisted up in knots shudders next to a haunting, hollow-eyed figure. Seeing such disparate images side-by-side produces strange sensations and awkward analogies. Somehow both groups achieve equal status as icons.

It is a bit odd seeing these wacky, diminutive fellows, who can usually fit inside an envelope blown up to the size of a easel painting. "Take a long look at these cartoon characters," advises Joshua Decter in his catalog essay. "If anything, they seem to exhibit the characteristics of extreme, even pathological, states of mind. . . ."

What he believes Wachtel is suggesting with these images "is no laughing matter, that behind every banal representation is an indication of social ideology that may be more disturbing than comic in its implication about how we supposedly see ourselves (or about how those who control these representations view us)."

Yet Wachtel constructs her paintings in a disarmingly simple and direct manner. "These irritating figures," Warren

acknowledges, "are not ironic, they are not `deconstructed,' they do not allude to anything. They are simply what they appear to be - grotesque, stereotypical displays of emotion." And, because of society's tendencies to squelch the "honest display of emotions," she concludes, "What is `in bad taste' is not the cartoons, but the emotions they stand for."

Also included are four paintings from her "Landscape" series, begun in 1989. These works, some 5 feet by nearly 12 feet, resemble large photographic murals - the kind that invite us into picturesque scenes of snowcapped mountains, lush tropical forests or brilliant southwestern sunsets. Wachtel, however, throws us into a crowd milling about the Berlin Wall, or shoves us shoulder-to-shoulder with demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

Each of the pictures she uses has become familiar to us through their reproduction in newspapers and magazines. Each is an event that has had a profound effect on the world community. But here they have become mute and distanced, removed too many times from the actual events they record. Rendered in silk screen, in single color tones - usually black, green or sepia on white, but sometimes on colored grounds or in negative - the artist gives them the additional mechanical chill of Warholian duplication.

Into these works, which consist of five to seven panels, Wachtel injects her cartoon figures - one screaming with hands gesturing wildly in the air against a brilliant yellow and orange-red background in "Landscape No. 5 (Wall)," another an exhausted, paint-spattered artist in "Landscape No. 3 (History)." Their displaced presence rudely interrupts the news photo image, sometimes splitting it in half, sometimes stopping the narrative action, sometimes switching to a different perspective of the same scene.

The effect of these cartoon interruptions, Warren suggests, are similar to "thought balloons" in the comics, or the theater's Greek chorus, which tells the audience what is happening in the play. In these paintings, the artist, through her cartoons, seems to be commenting upon the ways in which events are documented and digested and how they often take on the appearance of an entertainment spectacle.

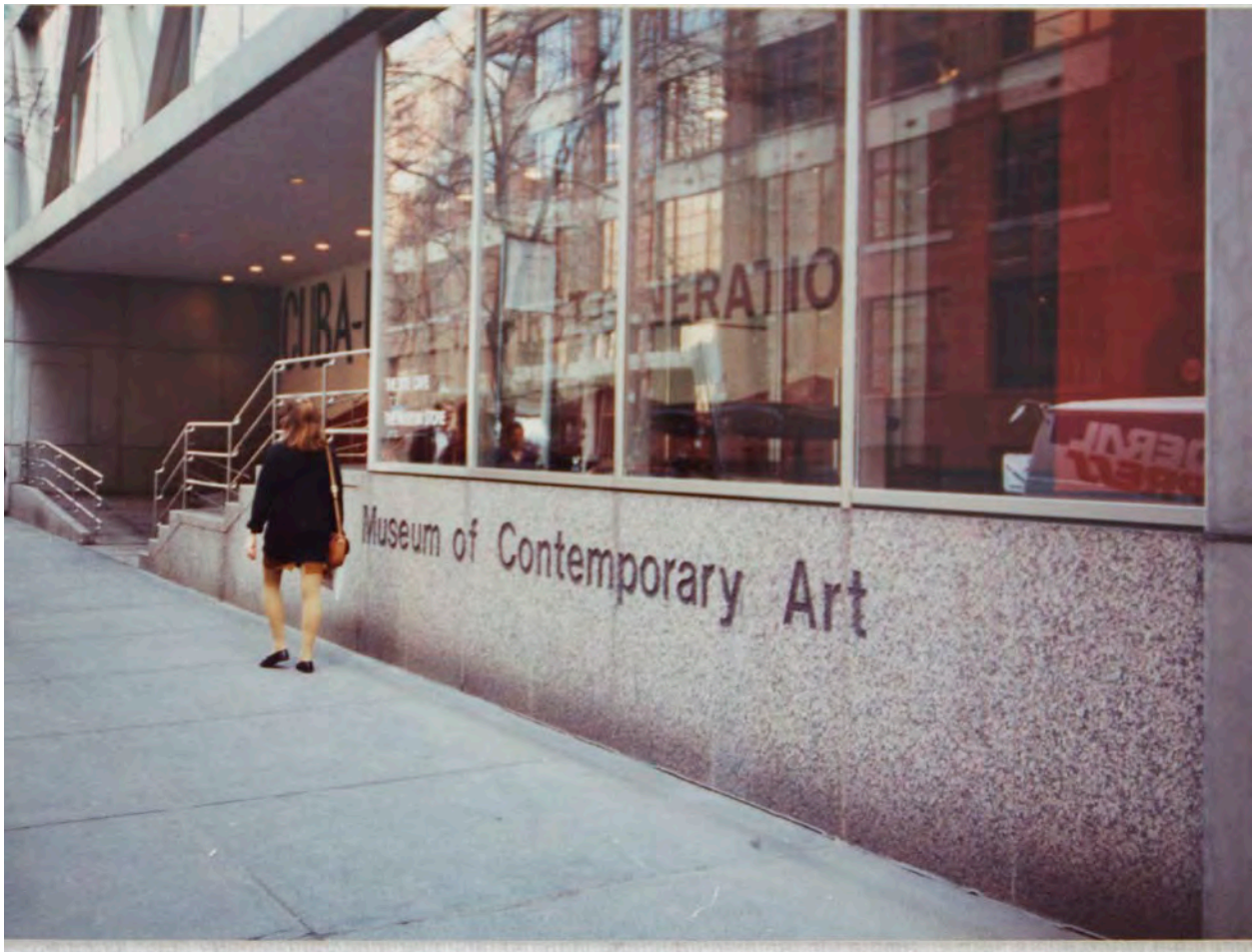
Wachtel's work has not been accepted wholeheartedly by critics. Some insist that her approach is too straightforward and lacking in substance. Others see her as a particularly astute social commentator. Not having exhibited widely in Chicago (her two previous outings were

gallery group shows - at Rhona Hoffman in 1985, at Robbin Lockett in 1989), the MCA exhibit is the first opportunity to see Wachtel's work in depth.

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Cartoon 41

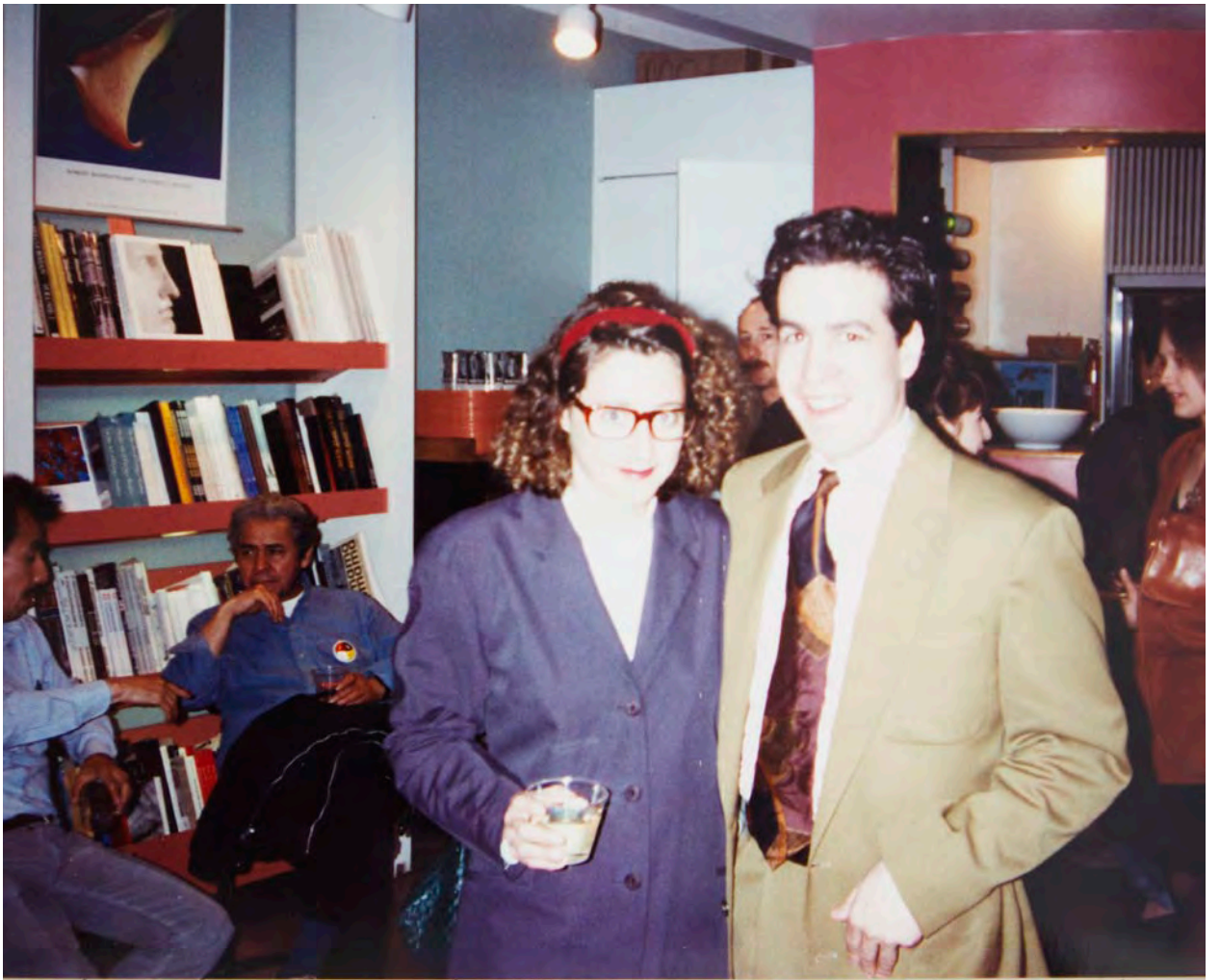
Julia Wachtel

Julia Wachtel is a cartoonist who has worked for many years in the Soviet Union. Her work is known for its political and social commentary.





















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Julia Wachtel

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The exhibition is a partial re-presentation of Julia Wachtel's landmark solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Spring/Summer 1991.

Text

Bob Nickas

Editors

Martin Clark & Steinar Sekkingstad

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Installation shots Bergen Kunsthall: Thor Brødreskift. Steven Parrino, *Gag*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 183 x 110 cm. Collection MAMCO, Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva.

Sherrie Levine, *Untitled (Presidential Profile)*, 1979. Collage of printed paper magazine page on paper, 50.8 x 35.6 cm. © Sherrie Levine. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Snap shots from the opening at MCA in 91: Depicting among others Julia Wachtel, Lynne Warren, Matthew Antezzo, Audrey Wachtel and Eric Rubinstein.

Jerry Lewis: photo released by the Muscular Dystrophy Association, the president of that, the Jerry Lewis actor, announces total amount raised in the MDA Jerry Lewis Telethon on Monday, September 6, 2010, in Las Vegas. Foto: Eric Candles / MDA / AP / NTB scanpix

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Rasmus Meyers allé 5,
N-5015 Bergen, Norway
+47 55559310
bergen@kunsthall.no
www.kunsthall.no