

RANDALL SCHMIT

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Essay by
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With the advent of the industrial revolution and the subsequent demise of the authority of such agencies as the aristocracy and the church, artists were liberated from past stylistic and thematic constraints. New agencies of value—more personal in nuance—were sanctioned by psychological inquiry as well as an assumption of the inherent sensitivity of the artistic temperament. Such license has given way to extraordinary creativity, but at the same time has resulted in periodic estrangement of the artists within their own contexts. While the indeterminacy of abstraction broke the tyranny of illusionistic narrative, the contemporary world was conversely being fed more determinate imagery by photography and film put to the service of reportage and advertising. Art consequently found itself estranged from its public, and during the last forty years had sought to resolve the gap between artistic interests and those of contemporary life by various strategies to engage the values of that “real world.” But where would that leave us in our creative quest?

Randall Schmit has grappled with these paradoxes in his work. A few years ago he was passionately involved in creating densely intertwined webs of color, that echoed the viscous energetics of Pollock, with the biomorphic eccentricities of Matta. Color and line declared the primacy of the morphology of the painting. They were the act of painting itself rather than the result of the act of painting. Last year he began to open up his compositions, allowing some of the preparatory draughtsmanship to be revealed. Gone was the underlying gessoed support. The facture thinned out to evocative

washes, and the pencil and charcoal lines were encased in clear gel medium. The seemingly impenetrable jungle of painterly activity also cleared to isolate separate “episodic arenas” within the compositions, and “realistic” elements appeared to tantalize the viewer. All of this to be achieved in such a way that the integrity of the all-over design of the earlier compositions would be preserved.

Schmit has set out to affirm his own world view, embarking on waters that have been charted before by Matta, Bacon—two of the artist's favorites—as well as de Chirico and Pollock. This exploration has been reconvened given the crisis of representation that has preoccupied the art world. Let us suppose that the resplendent galleon dominating the seascape at the lower left-hand portion of *Absent Hymn Before the Flood* is there to convey us through the intricate spatial and planar shifts, which are presided over by the boldly perspectival rays of green and mauve. The quirky framing elements imply the mutable and fluctuant character of the boundaries between the various realms. But specificity of empirical experience is not Schmit's primary concern, even within the limits of each of the discrete regions within the compositions. In fact these illusionistic episodes fail to oblige our sense of continuity as they spring forward in a succession of upcoming vignettes that flip forward in the upper regions of *Memory Theater (III)*. Given the tail-chase by the next frame where are we to image that delicate landscape—so like the misty ambiances of Chinese scroll painting—continues?

These compositions signal definite stances



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE GRAMMARIANS, 1990, 60 x 60",
oil, mixed media on canvas

in terms of one's coordinates in empirical space as well as states of being, but they are not to be seen as surrealistic "dream diaries." They are closer in spirit to the intricate diagrams of hermetic thought which guide the initiate towards alternate ways of thinking and seeing. Schmit has shrouded this journey to self-realization within his elaborate morphological means. The abrupt and constant alternation between realism and abstraction, between continuous and discontinuous space, the determinacy and indeterminacy of metaphoric forms that are and aren't, that seem to be and yet are not or become something else immediately— all function as much to camouflage as to indicate the way on what will be our own very personal journeys. Like the characters in "Dungeons and Dragons," who have been transported dimensionally, or the zany "Beetlejuice" (Betelgeuse) who can shift realms with the appropriate incantation, we often simply have to "go along for the ride" initially until we get our bearings.

This reference to Saturday morning cartoons is not meant to be frivolous or gratuitous. Schmit has been greatly influenced by comic art and speaks almost reverently not only of the content but the form of the ones that entertained him as a child. The rambunctuous artistry of these pictographs were the starting point of the gelatinous apparitions in these paintings. A more sobering association is found with Bacon and Matta in a recurring figure, a male figure whom Schmit identifies as his "soul" figure. Both hieratic and disordered, occasionally positioned on a floating, table-like plane—such as that in *New Truths, Not Vicious Pleasures*—this

is an entity that both Matta and Bacon would have appreciated. Female figures also attend the scenes, and one can also discern other spectral presences such as the curious shadowed gowned figure in *A Voluntary Belief Altered*, and the slimy green ectoplasmic entity in *Politics of the Mirror*. Other figural references are more robot-like, but their forms have been disciplined to an over-all biomorphism that maintains the visual integrity of the compositions.

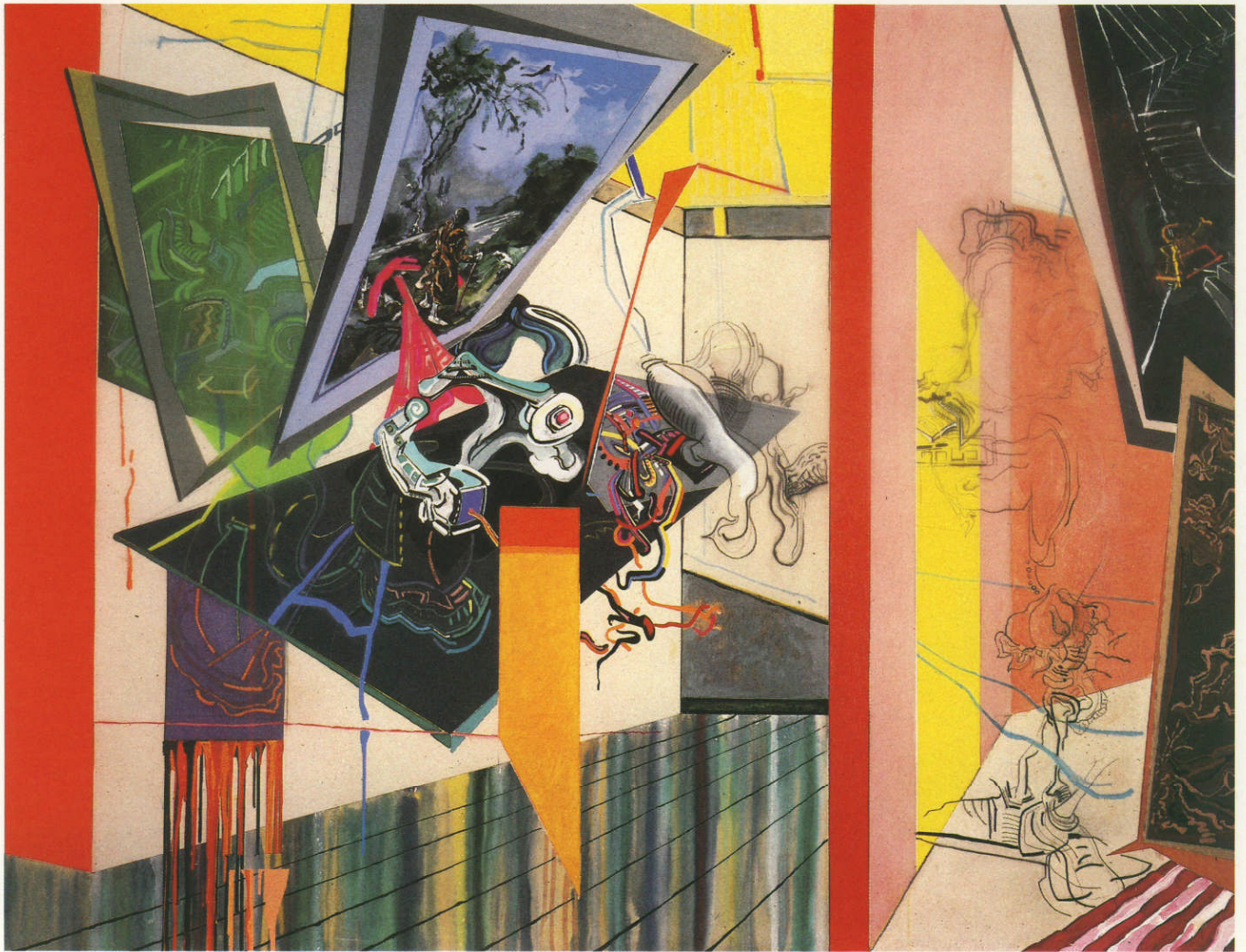
Hermetic magic postulates a continuous relationship between the heavens and the earth. The "effluvia" that emit from the stars would be utilized, channeled to effect events on the physical as well as the metaphysical by the skilled practitioner who had garnered the knowledge of not only how to channel these forces, but also how to "inscribe the talismans on the right material at the right astrological moment. These images were held to capture the spirit or power of the star and hold it or store it for future use."¹ The symbolic entity of this metaphysical quest is the legendary philosopher's stone. This talisman has supposedly eluded all its seekers over the centuries, but like the alchemists of old, Schmit realizes that it is the process of self-resolution and fulfillment that is the ultimate and truest achievement of any human being, any artist. He offers these paintings as testimony.

1. Yates, Frances A. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. University of Chicago Press. 1979, p.

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POLITICS OF THE MIRROR, 1989, 72 x 60",
oil, mixed media on canvas



MEMORY THEATER III, 1990, 84 x 108",
oil on canvas



ABSENT HYMN BEFORE THE FLOOD, 1990, 80 x 80",
oil, mixed media on canvas



A VOLUNTARY BELIEF, ALTERED, 1990, 72 x 60",
oil, mixed media on canvas



NEW TRUTHS, NOT VICIOUS PLEASURES, 1990, 52 x 83'',
oil, mixed media on canvas



A RETURN, DIVERSELY OBSCURED, 1989, 72 x 60",
oil, mixed media on canvas



MIDDAY RAGE AT THE CARTESIAN, 1990, 66 x 54",
oil, mixed media on canvas

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- Nash, Jesse W., "Randall Schmit at Tilden-Foley", *The New Orleans Art Review*, Volume VIII (89-90), No. 2, November/December 1989, p.p. 28-29.
- Green, Roger, "Randall Schmit", *The Times-Picayune*, Sunday, November 12, 1989, F-17.
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- Brenson, Michael, "Critic's Choices", *The New York Times*, July 26, 1987.
- Wallace, Kent, "Four Shows; Four Hits", *Artspeak*, Vol. VIII, No. 21, July 1, 1987.
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- Glade, Luba, "Randall Schmit", *Gambit*, New Orleans, October 8, 1984.
- "Randall Schmit", *Sunday Advocate Magazine*, Baton Rouge, February 14, 1984.
- "Schmit Exhibition", *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 28, 1984.
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- Harlan, Calvin, "Peach Blossoms, Mexicans, et al.", *The New Orleans Art Review*, Vol. III, No. 2.8, March/April/May 1984.

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