



Arts & Letters
January 30, 2005

‘Collage Series’ A DYNAMIC EXHIBITION AT ART VITAM

Carlos M. Luis

Special Feature / el Nuevo Herald

The invention of collage at the beginning of the 20th century radically changed the course of modern painting. While the Cubists used collage to introduce new realistic and spatial elements into their paintings, the Surrealists, led by Max Ernst, used it to add poetics into theirs. The Cubists used all sorts of materials, such as newspapers, scraps of fabric etc. to create compositions closely related to their structural explorations. The Surrealists, on the other hand, emphasized the clash between dissimilar elements confined within a very limited space. Between the Cubists and the Surrealists, other artists such as the Dadaists, created photomontages, or like Kurt Schwitters, collected refuse from the streets to definitively destroy any reference to traditional painting. In the course of time these various paths crossed, creating hybrid works from purely surrealist images, to abstract collages and Pop art.

The collages exhibited by Mathilde Denis, Christian Duran, Matthew Rose and Christina Stahr at the Art Vitam Gallery are good examples of work rooted in the history of the medium. Each of these contemporary artists has taken distinct characteristics of the collage technique and re-interpreted them. The concept itself celebrated the use of an extensive range of materials formerly considered to be outside of the realm of art. Artists seeking meaning in the everyday created a new visual vocabulary. What had originally been seen as a vulgarization of art became, overnight, a valid aesthetic practice. Ever since Marcel Duchamp’s famous urinal, does anyone still doubt that anything can be transformed into a work of art with all its implications?

Each artist in the current exhibition has sought out raw materials regardless of their provenance. Only the artist’s vision has brought to light what was hidden from others in its original raw state. Each of their pieces continues what the

Cubists had begun: collecting objects, such as bits of fabric, newspapers, etc. to include in their compositions. Let us consider each of the artists on exhibit.

Mathilde Denis incorporates a vast range of materials into her acrylics painted on canvas. The structure of her work obeys the same concepts proposed by certain constructivist painters to create theirs. Consider for example, Kasimir Malevitch who arranged geometric shapes within a simplified space. In spite of the application of a thick layer of varnish, her work remains austere, perhaps due to its monochrome palette, varied in only one of the canvases *Mon Canapé Rouge*. In many works torn labels, and certain key words such as “Love,” “Rien,” and “Lumiere,” suggest an inclination for visual poetry.

Christian Duran, a Miami native, also takes a poetic path by using newspaper pages as a background for superimposed drawings that are primarily anatomical in origin. This combination does not lack poetic references, although some pieces (*To Transcend*) address social issues. Their size (around 12” x 10”) allows the artist to concentrate on the essence of what he wishes to emphasize in his imagery, in which collage emerges as a surprising form through the viewer’s focus on their central themes.

Christina Stahr seeks out old books whose texts serve as catalysts for the creation of a series of works, which in my opinion are the most lyrical in the exhibition. The use of tissue paper to partially veil these texts lends her work an appealing mystery. This New York artist has also understood the possibilities of using language in order to decontextualize it, and has given it yet another role, one with political content, in several of her compositions. But in reality, what ultimately triumphs in her work is poetry in the best sense of the term.

Saving for last Matthew Rose and his digital impressions. The initial impact that his work communicates is his sense of humor and in some cases the presence of images with erotic allusions. Both elements merge in collages that are not alien to Dadaist montages and their transgressive finality. Collage, interpreted by the Surrealists as a surprising encounter between two or more disparate realities could also be mentioned here, as well as his relationship to pop. Ultimately what prevails is the playful nature of his work, which lends the exhibition an undeniable freshness.

With these four artists the Art Vitam Gallery has succeeded in bringing together an ensemble of works that demonstrate without a doubt the continued vitality of the collage medium.

The exhibition “Collage Series” remains on view at the Art Vitam Gallery until February 26. 3452 North Miami Avenue, (305) 571-8342