STEENSMA : FILE

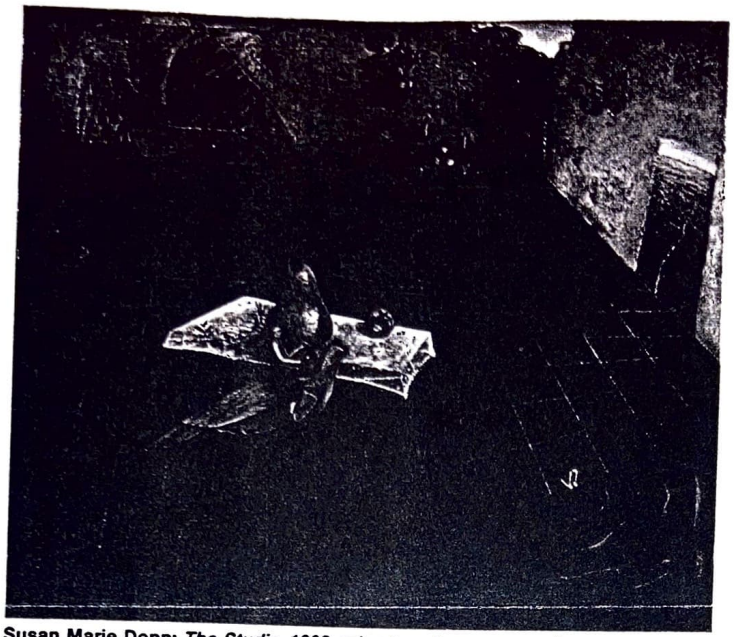
SEATTLE

J. Steensma at Mazey Hickey

This gallery mounted two exhibitions of this particular artist's work within the space of a few months. Related by the dubious theme "Northwest Traditions Continued," both groupings raised the issue of whether the legacy of the Northwest School—as comprised by Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, Guy Anderson and Morris Graves—can be considered alive today.

The problem is, this seemingly spurious issue just won't go away. Imagery traditionally associated with the Northwest School—birds, fish and snakes—pops up in local galleries with the redundant regularity of a clock chiming in a funeral chapel. Ostensibly one of the most persistent devotees of the misty-mountain look is J. Steensma. What saves Steensma, however, from the nauseating ecological sentimentality typical of the original Big Four is his outrageous sense of humor. Like another "mystic" wag, Charles Krafft, Steensma does takeoffs on Graves, in this case using brown grocery bags instead of rice paper as his preferred support. Where Graves painted solemn pairs of snakes coupling under the moon, Steensma places a single one, equipped with tennis shoes and a paintbrush, before a waiting canvas (*Daily Painting Exercise*, 1988). If every major art style degenerates into satire, then Steensma is the Northwest School's most prolific degenerate. Fish, fur and fowl all dance insouciantly across junked-up, recycled canvases and threaten to obscure the real artist behind the jokes.

Nonetheless, the two shows also managed to reveal that the trickster everyone considered J. Steensma to be was a mask or a pose hiding a profoundly serious symbolist. Largely eschewing satire, Steensma's newer, all-gray canvases go beyond the formulae of the Pacific School and suggest a private and complex imagination at work. Far from being a folk artist or parodist, the 48-year-old painter trained with Hans Hofmann-follower Robert C. Jones at the University of Washington, won several prestigious awards in the 1960s, and then went into an eclipse brought on by ill health for more than a decade.



Susan Marie Dopp: *The Studio*, 1988, mixed mediums on wood, 20 by 22 inches; at San Francisco MOMA. **(Review on p. 185).**

Jay Steensma: *Landscape #7*, 1988, oil on canvas, 30 by 40 inches; at Mazey Hickey.

Reemerging in 1985, he produced a series of small exhibitions that demonstrated the fruits of his isolated and reclusive hiatus. Certain Gravesian symbols began then to appear—the chalice, the snake, the moon—but in a symbolic context that was emphatically Christian rather than Zen. The first of these two recent shows included a long series of small, exquisite gray cartoon landscapes in oil. With huge black clouds overhead typically dominating these compositions, they create an ominous impression, bordering on the apocalyptic, and while borrowing their prophetic character from Callahan they imbue it as well with something of nuclear-era tension. Churches, houses and men hanging from nooses have joined the symbolic vocabulary.

The second grouping both accentuated the local themes of dying birds and fish skeletons and introduced more black, white and gray works which assembled disparate private images. *Northwest Equinox* (1989) plants a black disk above a white one, both on a ground of gray. The effect is strikingly subtle, perhaps portending a shift to abstraction.

Passion of the Inner Eye (1989)—like *Equinox*, the title is a play on a work by Graves—amounts to a rebus of images (faces, tents, snakes and fish) more akin in its mechanics to the work of Jasper Johns than to anything produced by the West Coast painter, long retired to Northern California.

Deceptively campy titles like *Startled Beaver* and *Northwest Extinction* at times threaten to conceal Steensma's serious intent. Wrenched from the context of the "mystics," he stands on his own as an oddly troubled visionary. To tie the paintings to their ostensible art-historical inspiration is to deny them their own enigmatic, if less than thoroughly original, character.

—Matthew Kangas

COLOGNE

Heinz Hausmann at Johnen & Schöttle

Heinz Hausmann's fondness for nature is certainly not in tune with the neo-Dadaism and social critique prevalent in the work of so many younger German artists. But, seen here in his first major one-person show, the newcomer's strange, dark pictures of underwater spaces and rampant shoreland vegetation certainly hold their own.

As a prelude to creating his mute and floating world, the 29-year-old artist evidently spent a year breeding plants in self-constructed aquariums and basins and in experimenting with slate, motor oil, watercolor and oil washes to create the appropriate muddy effects. (He eventually settled on repeated oil washes in dark, algae-green hues.) The results, in the six pictures seen here, are strangely and evocatively decentered, as if one were submerged under water along with the aquatic plants, mussels and fish Hausmann takes as his subject matter in three of these works.

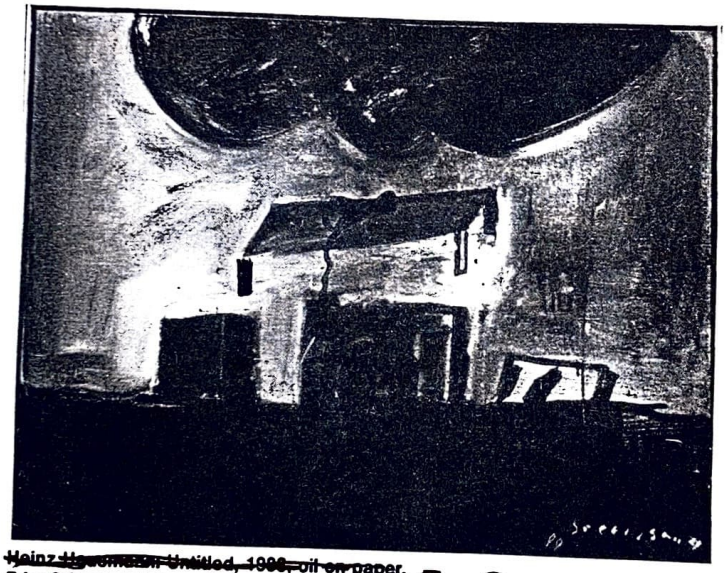
The two large shoreland views do not offer any more sense of pictorial stability than the three underwater paintings. One of them is dominated by a pair of small, weightless-seeming white blossoms, which are set against huge tree trunks that bisect the canvas vertically and diagonally. The trees, despite their size, fail to create a sense of material sol-

idity. Instead, primordial and grim, they seem to be visualizations of a silent, natural principle of growth and decay quite outside civilization.

Hausmann's invocation of nature as mute yet resonant with meaning seems to be rooted in the European Romantic tradition of an otherworldly scepticism towards civilization. Like one of his heroes, Joseph Beuys, the Düsseldorf-based Hausmann is concerned with those non-scientific qualities of natural matter that are perceptible to the poetic eye only. Hausmann, however, is far less interested in political-cultural theory than was Beuys. Hausmann's realm is the ideal—he paints not what is there but what he wants to see.

—Matthias Winzen

Yasumasa Morimura: *Portrait (Twins)*, 1988, color photograph, clear medium, 82½ by 118 inches; at NW House.



~~Heinz Hausmann: Untitled, 1986, oil on paper, 7 by 9 feet, at Johnen & Schöttle.~~ JAY SPECKSMA

TOKYO

Yasumasa Morimura at NW House

All over Tokyo last fall, one could see posters of Manet's little uniformed "Fifer," advertising a huge *Japonisme* exhibition of art works from French museums. On the postcard announcing Yasumasa Morimura's exhibition at Gallery NW House, there was the little fellow again—with dropped trousers.

This mockery was not rendered in paint, since Morimura—one of the Japanese artists invited by L.A. MOCA to show their work at the L.A. Art Fair—is a photographer. It's the latest in his series of works confounding realities. Every "production" involves costumes, properties and painting, and every one stars Morimura himself, usually undressed or in drag.

Earlier works showed Morimura in a bronze wig and gown, uncomfortably impersonating a statue. About a year ago he took on Duchamp, van Gogh and Ingres—in the last case variously wearing a cutout of the maiden of *The Source* as a costume, or using the properties of photography to blend her body into his own at a strategic point.

This most recent exhibition uses Manet as its sole takeoff point. There are three versions of the little musician. One is relatively straightforward, while the others present him naked either front or back, incorporating props that only make sense when seen with the other work in this show—Morimura's interpretation of *Olympia*. Covering his genitals in the front view is a cast of the hand of Olympia's black maid, and emerging from between his legs in the back view is a cast of Olympia's hand—which was itself presented in the show, mounted on a shelf like a saint's relic.

This *Olympia* is the quintessential Morimura photograph: color, oversize, recreating a familiar image, straight-faced but with an air of spoof, involving theatrical looseness of reproduction, and—naturally—featuring Morimura (he plays both parts). Fusing past and present, East and West, Olympia wears a blond wig, chunky junk jewelry and pink nail polish. Her slippers are metallic magenta. She leans against suitably European-looking pillows with tatted edges, and rests upon a silver and gold kimono embroidered with cranes and cherry blossoms. (Manet should have thought of that!) At her feet is not a fuzzy black cat but a ceramic "waving" cat of the sort seen outside small restaurants and shops in Japan. (These figures are supposed to beckon business by their motion, and Morimura's inclusion of one here makes it a piquant reminder of Olympia's professional identity.)

The maid presents obviously plastic flowers: in Morimura's photographs, honesty is at constant issue. For instance, the painted curtain of his backdrop and the highlights and shadows applied to his face refer to the conventions of painting more than they actually make use of them. Through painting Morimura mocks the realism of then, and through plastic he mocks the realities of now.

Morimura's brand of photography is the studio setup, a format associated with fashion and advertising, and also with the painter's studio. Olympia had her impact for precisely the same reason young women are still used (the appropriate word) in advertising. And her knowing look seems a role Morimura was destined to play: his photographs have always involved the direct stare, the communication between the actor and the viewer that seems to bridge the immense gulf of reproduction.

That self-aware look succinctly differentiates Morimura's photographs from Cindy Sherman's and Lucas Samaras's. Unlike Samaras, who always plays himself whether distorted or not, Morimura is acting a part. But unlike Sherman, he doesn't seek to make the role-playing convincing but instead remains himself. It's that ambivalence, and his placid countenance in his Manet works, that give a high-strung tension to what would otherwise be simply kitschy outrageousness or art-school joking.

Morimura has no precedent, and no peer, in Japan. Any analogy of his poses to the grand gestures of kabuki would be misleading, because his style is unquestionably of the present: it's television taste, comic-book drama, Japanese borrowing and mimicry, and gay camp—in Morimura's own distinct combination.

—Janet Koplos

Review Contributors

Brooks Adams, Lawrence Campbell, Frederick Ted Castle, Holland Cotter, Eleanor Heartney, Gerrit Henry, Nancy Princenthal, Calvin Reid and **Walter Thompson** are critics based in New York . . . **John Ash** and **Eileen Myles** are poets who write on art . . . **Robert Berlind, Stephen Ellis, Ken Johnson** and **Stephen Westfall** are artists who write on art . . . **Amy Jinkner-Lloyd** is a critic based in Atlanta . . . **Matthews Kangas** writes on art from Seattle . . . **David Levi-Strauss** is a San Francisco-based critic . . . **Carl Little** is a critic based in Maine . . . **David S. Rubin** is director of the Freedman Gallery, Albright College . . . **Kathleen Shields** writes on art from the Southwest . . . **Sue Taylor** writes on art from Chicago . . . **Chris Waddington** is a Minneapolis-based critic . . . **Matthias Winzen** is a critic who lives in Düsseldorf . . . **Janet Koplos** is the art critic for the *Asahi Evening News*, Tokyo.