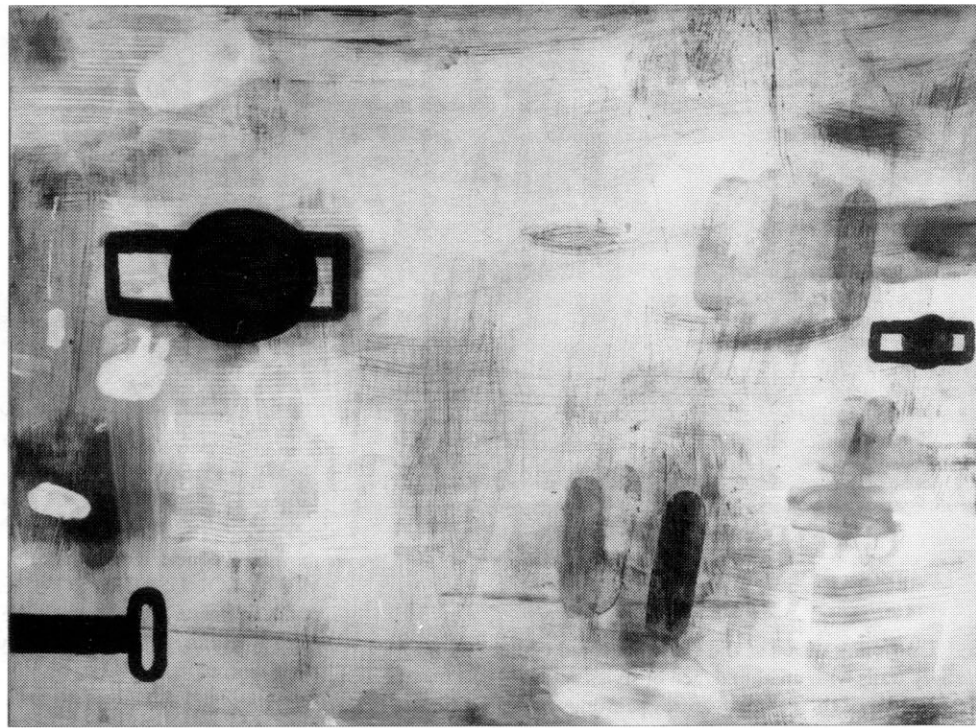




Valerie Bogdan, *The Green Bedroom*, oil on canvas, 2004, 48"x60"



Eric Erickson, *Onlay*, oil on board, 36x48



## SURPRISE RESULTS

### IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

Valerie Bogdan and Eric Erickson  
at van Brunt Gallery,  
BEACON, NEW YORK

A review by Jeanette Fintz

Making one's way through the webs and thatches of paint in Valerie Bogdan's new work at van Brunt, it's clear that she is a dyed-in-the-wool expressionist. If abstract expressionism, the anointed idiom of classic American painting, hadn't existed, it's plausible that Valerie would have had to invent it.

Untangling her nervous dancing strokes, one doesn't question why, still under 30, she chose to machete her way down this path she just seems a natural at it. There is no separation of the actor from the act. She exhibits, in this second show at van Brunt, a growing control and selectivity in matters of scale, diversity and direction of mark, and specificity of color palette, which is impressive.

Bogdan's stated goal is to make a moment live. In making it come alive for herself she also, in most instances, convinces the viewer that it was worth sharing, worth experiencing. And the experience, if you go all the way with it, isn't entirely vicarious. To really experience these paintings you

have to work through them and find the byways that Bogdan created to reemerge to tell the tale. In them there is a frenzy to capture life. The paintings often feel like a battle between ecstasy, frustration, and doubt, that classic existentialist angst-a fight to be in the moment and to be worthy of it.

Luckily, Bogdan is a born warrior, reporting back from the front lines. Paintings like *Toys for Crocodiles* and *Everything That Ever Happened* orient us to the point of view of a firsthand observer. *Toys for Crocodiles* presents the visual field of a diver swimming through underwater weeds to a glimpse of clearing. In *Poised on the Edge of a Saltbaker*, an accretion of brown crosshatched marks form an off-kilter plateau from which you are invited to jump down onto a scorched, scraped, nearly bare plane of canvas: an inevitable, if not hospitable, refuge. Bogdan's growing mastery of surface density and direction puts our faces right into it. She becomes our eyes and surrogate body in environments that are simultaneously beautiful and threatening.

There is greater confidence in her evocations of place and time, particularly the watery tunnel of *Toys for Crocodiles*, the frantic autumnal vibrations of *The Dimmer Party*, and the shimmering mirage of *The Green Bedroom*. Their palettes and postcubist fracture express a moving, natural space. In these aspects Bogdan is working within the traditions of Joan Mitchell, Michael Goldberg, and the Abstract Impressionist movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, traditions that joined the landscape painter's obsession with light to the in-the-moment ethos of existentialism. The roots go back further still to Monets late works.

*The Dinner Party*, in which thin calligraphic black lines weave a sybaritic dance between the fiery reds, oranges, and siennas, suggesting quite an evening, is in my opinion her most accomplished work to date. Adjacent to it is *Aftermath*, a small painting with a close-up view of two sloping, branch-like lines in an unusual palette of spent gray-blue and desiccated browns that are the last leaves of autumn. It is a haiku rather than a love sonnet. Paired, they display the temperament of an artist with a fierce appetite and attachment for the visual as well as the visceral, whose work recalls to us the

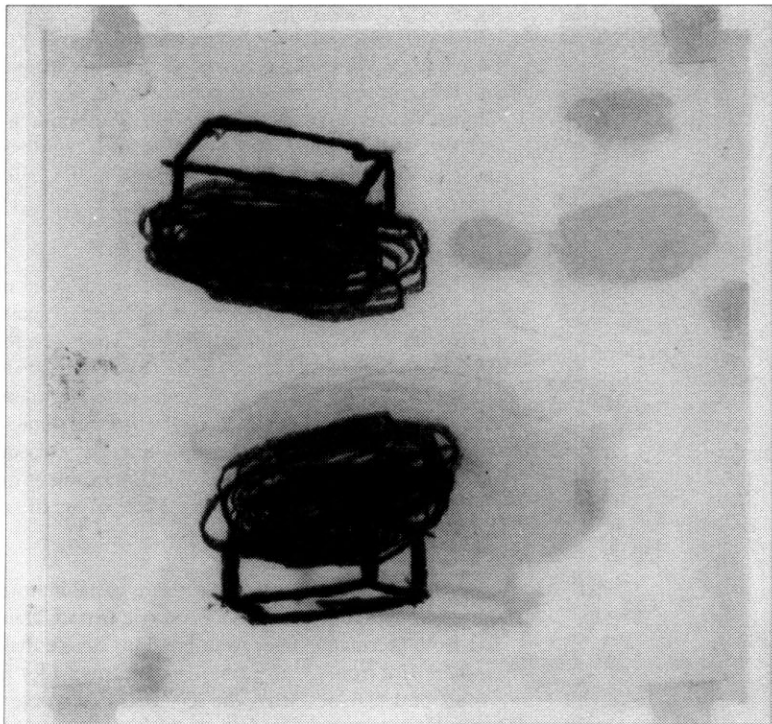
pain and the pleasure of sensual experience.

Bogdan was apparently born to speak in the expressionist vernacular. Eric Erickson is a willing disciple of the world according to Philip Guston, which provokes the questions: where and how does an artist enter into the discourse of art? What is visual literacy for an artist? How does an artist develop, adapt, or adopt a workable language? How much is consciously chosen and how much is intuition?

Guston's late career works reduced his visual language to the primal expressive means of the cave painter and the sometimes-offensive directness of the cartoonist. For this work he was first vilified and later heralded as the liberator of new painting — the first postmodern figurative artist. It is understandable why for some younger painters, Guston's abandoning of both pure Abstract Expressionism and traditional representational space for a primitivist subjective worldview was regarded as a messianic event and a turning point in the linearly interpreted path of Western art.

Though Erickson's paintings are abstract in construction and he has not thus far included any actual figures, he has created a language of ideograms (as did Guston) — symbols which have been synthesized from recombining simple shapes such as rectangles, ellipses, and circles. He arranges these to build a narrative of sorts, full of mysterious comings and goings, but of ultimately very unresolved actions. In a show at A.D.D. gallery in Hudson, New York, last year, Erickson's paintings often implied a story that apparently took place out of the frame, so to speak, or referred to actions happening at such a speed that they were blurred. Perhaps the subject of the story had just exited, or perhaps, like Godot, had never arrived.

In the van Brunt show there is more action. The work in general is less purely lyrical (if forest green ellipses blipping across a semi-opaque sky can be called lyrical). These works are more populated. The pervasive sense of existential doubt is there in the casually overpainted surfaces revealing only the most tenuous remnant of evidence that an actual event had taken place. But the general emptying out of the center field that was predominant in the last show has given way to



**Eric Erickson, Heaven, series, drawing, oil, oil stick, paper, 15"x16"**



**Valerie Bogdan, A Spiders Ability to Survive, oil on canvas, 2004, 16"x20"**

a veritable battleground, though of a very cool, cerebral type.

If Bogdan is a valiant warrior wielding her brushes to tame unruly thickets, then Erickson is a thinker, half-paralyzed by the very relativism of his thoughts. Doubleness is everywhere. Four drawings entitled *Heaven* have images facing or reflecting each other, some showing cloudlike pentimenti from the reverse side of the paper. In *Onlay*, in oil on board, he creates a reflection of sorts through whitewashing and scraping down the main actors, thereby etherealizing them, and then repeating their mirror images in an oblique diagonal orientation further forward on the canvas. This process makes the space into an arena where the actions are nullified, implying a stand-off.

Erickson's ideograms and their contextual placement in the newer canvases, and particularly in the *Heaven* drawings seem to have been influenced by our country's most recent war in Iraq. The action, while crudely and directly painted, seems once removed, like images reflecting off a TV screen. Guston internalized his guilt and rage at social and political atrocities, and his later work displayed symbols heretofore of external persecution, transformed into his own internal demons. This war possibly has provided Erickson with new resources.

His conjunction of rectangle and ellipse combine in various ways to appear tanklike, rolling through a desert emptiness; like coffins lolling in pools of blood; and, perhaps, like a mythic vessel carrying a fallen soldier across the lake to Avalon, Valhalla? A red ellipse floating over a rectangle in the ever-present chalky blue sky reads as a halo, implying death.

Two ellipses joined to form a right angle read like guns or phalluses. In *How It Happens*, which is reminiscent of children's drawings of battles, they face and take aim at each other.

In this universe there is little solid matter; the coolness of water becomes the coolness of sky. The earth is a blank white piece of paper only made real through the shadows on it. Guston often used imagery of a flood of biblical proportions as a metaphor for the apocalypse that he felt was inevitable and perhaps well deserved. Erickson's *The Flood #5*, one of the few paintings in which solid brick (matter) is rendered, melts it into a swath of water. Each, water, and brick seem to be as equally upfront and real in a painterly way, and contrarily, equally as immaterial. The painting works neatly as abstraction as well as symbolically.

Erickson's ideographic drawings have none of the unforced grace of Guston's fluid linear style. They seem purposefully clumsy, obstinate in their persistence, like a precocious child, that you take them seriously. At a quick glance there is comedy in these pieces, and like Guston he gets quite a bit of mileage from his images, repeating them with a few changes in scale and context. For example, the red, leg-like shape taking a rapid burlesque-style exit stage right in *A little Later*, is a good bit.

The paintings are stripped of any intermediate colors that made appearances in the previous show and that had let a bit of warmth into the cool combo of primary red, white, and blue. There is only the one cigar roll brown bullet to mediate in this world of ciphers. Like Guston, he has forsaken that

shimmering world of color, the world of the senses in which Bogdan immerses us.

Bogdan strives to be in the moment and to bring the viewers awareness to a lush dazzle that has universal impact as long as a human gesture and the dance of nature exist. Erickson is slightly outside himself, commenting on the human condition. Like the wide-apart spacing of his double initials, E E, he appears to assume, like his model, the double role of the observer and the observed, as Guston before him was the victim and the perpetrator. It is a cerebral form of abstraction which hasn't lost its earthiness because of the humor, the freshness and tactility that ground the work. It is a dance of another kind, appealing on the surface to many, but giving deeper access to those who know the code.

For more information on Bogdan and Erickson please contact van Brunt Gallery Beacon at 845-838-2995 or visit them online at [www.vanbruntgallery.com](http://www.vanbruntgallery.com). Gallery hours are Thursday through Sunday, 11am-6pm. The gallery is located at 460 Main Street, Beacon, New York.

Jeanette Fintz is a painter, art educator, and arts writer who resides in Surprise, New York. She teaches at Parsons School of Design in New York City.