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LOST ART

PHARMAKA, A SELF-CHRISTENED "MOVEMENT" OF ARTISTS, YEARS TO RETURN PAINTING TO ITS RIGHTFUL PLACE AS THE GRANDEST OF ALL ART FORMS. WRITES **STEPHEN FIFE**.



On a Saturday night in early 2004, crowds of the hip and the curious (and those simply seeking free food and a party) streamed into the enormous Bedlam Warehouse in downtown L.A. Stars like Meg Ryan and the rapper Common Sense could be seen mingling with rapidly-aging "young" directors and studio execs on the prowl. This could have been a funky fundraiser for Tippi Hedrin's tiger preserve except for all the paintings on the walls. So many paintings; toweringly massive ones, small ones, bright ones, dark ones, seeming to sprout from every available space, and each one distinctive, eye-catchingly different from the next.

So what was this event? The

latest outpouring from Julian Schnabel? A new group of contenders for "Next Big Thing," as chosen by Larry Gagosian (or some other super-dealer)? Not exactly. This was the coming-out party for Pharmaka, a self-christened "movement" of artists, who may indeed become the next big thing even while they reject that very concept.

Pharmaka is, first and foremost, something of a paradox: serious artists living in the middle of the glitz factory (Hollywood), who pursue their craft with the dedication of monks. Even their name is a paradox. It comes from the ancient Greek, where it means both "poison" and "remedy". It can also be translated as "to paint" and "painter's colours",

which may be more to the point. The founders of Pharmaka were looking for a word that conveyed a return to the origins of painting, to the roots of the art form, as well as a rejection of the market-driven values of today's hype-inflated art world.

According to Shane Guffogg, the group's spokesman and unofficial leader, Pharmaka itself came about almost by accident. "One night a few of us were having dinner when the conversation

turned to how many of the wrong artists were getting museum shows just because they played the game of not rocking the boat, of being PC," Shane explained. "At the time I was designing sets for a play called *The Dadaists* about that particular group of poets and painters. So we started thinking about what kind of movement we would come up with."

This sparked a series of emails between the artists (Shane, Jeff Britton, Tim Forcum, John Scane, Alissa Washaw, Vonn Summer, along with the art dealer Adam Gross), and soon some common threads began to emerge. They all agreed that they had no interest in inciting social change or making any kind of political commentary. All they >

Above Shane Guffogg in his studio



cared about was showing that painting was still a viable art form. They yearned to resurrect it from the "trendy" debasement into which it had fallen, to return painting to its rightful place as "the grandest of all art forms" (as John Scane has described it.)

The Art Movement that served as the role model for the group's thinking was the Abstract Expressionists. The seven members of Pharmaka were attracted to the spiritual element in that

group of 1950s painters, their dedication to debunking falsity and hypocrisy in the art world, while seeking their own higher truths. But Pharmaka is not nearly as angry or self-destructive as their predecessors, nor are they looking for the kind of common idiom (non-figurative art) that bound those other painters together. Pharmaka is, stylistically, a highly eclectic bunch, embracing both abstract and figurative art, with a great appreciation for the

differences between its members.

No, what binds the artists of Pharmaka together is a belief in "the power of painting as a visual and emotional language". That, at least, is how Shane Guffogg has phrased it in the group's manifesto. "We are here, as artists, to make art," he asserts. "We are here to share our truths with the viewer through the very visceral act of painting. We are here to compel the world to stop, if only for one brief moment, and share

Left Shaolin, acrylic and oil on canvas. (John Scane, 2003.)

in a truth."

Pharmaka celebrates the act of pure creation, of pure imagination, the non-social joy of painting, proclaiming that "To many who practice the craft, painting is a mystical experience. This has little to do with the act of capturing an image or a moment... Great painting requires only one ephemeral, yet triumphant, moment of real human understanding between the viewer and artist."

With the increasing success of Pharmaka – there is serious talk now of offering the group a downtown gallery as a permanent home – these "moments" may become very common. The challenge then, of course, will be for Pharmaka to maintain the purity of its focus and not be corrupted by the very market-driven forces that they claim to reject. Will they be able to do so, where so many others (like their heroes, the Abstract Expressionists) have been co-opted or worn down or just plain destroyed? Stay tuned. ■

Link

www.pharmaka-art.org

Shane Guffogg also has a solo show at the Judy Saslow Gallery, Chicago, from May 30 to July 10, 2004.