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Aftermath at Vessel Gallery

William Harsh resuscitates Modernist figuration.

By *DeWitt Cheng*



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The art world is now open to all manner of experimentation and content, thanks to the collapse of the ethos of abstraction promulgated by postwar critic Clement Greenberg and his loyalist "Clem clones." His dogmatic specter still haunts art discourse, however: The figurative, narrative painting that he dismissed as aesthetically obsolete and sentimental is still scorned in some quarters, as are poetry and metaphor, emotional anathema to our dandified age of ironic consumerism.

However, with American imperial decline peering over the horizon and slouching our way, perhaps we're ready for a less giddy, more rooted view of life and art. **William Harsh** makes a forceful case for aesthetic seriousness in *Morphologies*, a show of some three dozen paintings, prints, and drawings that suggests disciplined self-expression as a way out of the art world's current hothouse/funhouse mentality. The title, recalling Roberto Matta's "psychic morphologies," fittingly invokes Surrealist metamorphosis. But Harsh's tangled, collapsed structures and artifacts derive as well from Cubist form analysis, Expressionist distortion, and the somber, enigmatic poetry of Metaphysical art. Picasso, Léger, Rouault, Chirico, Beckmann, and Guston (the painter-tragicomic with whom Harsh studied) are some of the friendly ghosts flitting through what the artist calls "jerry-rigged assemblies, sometimes fortress-like in appearance" — visual metaphors, perhaps, for human history and culture, with its grand cycles of growth, decay, and rebirth. Whether or not the works harbor social comment, they are powerfully present, vortices of barely controlled energy that almost explode from their frames. (No batteries required.) In "Dreamer," a fanged head, its mouth agape, scans the horizon — a Picassoid Skull on



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the Hill. In "Phoenix," a creature/structure galumphs along, flailing its tentacles and claws. In "Rocinante" and "Rocinante II," Don Quixote's mangy steed morphs into an assemblage of scraps rising from or collapsing into the dirt. In "Ice Age," a tatterdemalion cart of uncertain utility is endowed with ribs and an intestinal tentacle or tail. In "Oracle," a rickety platform or lectern is defended by an irascible-looking serpent of cloth. Harsh talks with art historian **Dickran Tashjian**, an expert on Dada, Surrealism, and Machine Age art, on Saturday, November 20, at 4 p.m. Morphologies also features the sculptures of **Maru Hoerber**, boat frameworks fashioned from tree branches and cast into bronze, and the jewelry of **Eve Singer**; it runs through November 27 at **Vessel Gallery** (471 25th St., Oakland). 510-893-8800 or Vessel-Gallery.com

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