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# Strange Visions of Exotic Lands

By JOHN GOODRICH | April 13, 2006
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"O sages standing in God's holy fire ... be the singing-masters of my soul." So wrote William Butler Yeats in 1928, in "Sailing to Byzantium," a poem yearning for a land of exotic, timeless culture.

The poem provides the title for Hollis Taggart's survey of nearly 30 paintings and mixed-media works by Tony Vevers. Spanning 40 years, these works don't have the intensity of Yeats's ecstatic longings, but they are compelling for their peculiar, pensive images and lucid color.

In his youth, Mr. Vevers (b. 1926) hung out at the Cedar Tavern, the famous haunt of the Abstract Expressionists, and he became friends with Robert Motherwell and Franz Kline. He followed a different path, however. In 1955 he moved to Provincetown, Mass., which has been his principal residence ever since. (Mr. Vevers is currently writing a history of Provincetown artists.) Unlike the painters of the New York School, he stuck with representational imagery, producing landscapes and interiors with a delicately brushed, almost stain-like technique. He adopted a language of simplified forms and lively colors at times similar to his friend Milton Avery's, but with a more wistful and hermetic spirit; in them one senses a lingering hunger for a lost Arcadia.

Several canvases from the 1950s at Hollis Taggart describe subtly gleaming landscapes with brushy, broken strokes. By the 1960s, Mr. Vevers's colors became more intense and his forms broader and crisper.

One of the most ambitiously sized paintings, the 6-foot-wide "Hound Voice" (1961), takes its title from another Yeats poem. This handsome canvas describes an idyllic scene, with three lanky male nudes in a landscape of glowing yellows, blues, and greens. Graciousness, not realism, prevails; the men's chastely pink forms seem at odds with the hunting hounds and two dead deer that surround them. The canvas's reductive shapes recall Avery, but its vibrant, careful updating of a classical theme is more reminiscent of the Nabi painter Maurice Denis.

In a number of other canvases from the 1960s, Mr. Vevers adds a disjunctive note to otherwise gentle images. These paintings conjoin separate views: In "Greensboro Morning" (1964), the image of a nude woman drying herself next to a tub is hemmed on either side by more vertical images, one of a snow-covered driveway, and the other of a dimly lit staircase. Are the scenes simultaneous? Are they biographical? Like the individual scenes themselves, the connections have a private, poetic import that the viewer can only guess at.

Most of Mr. Vevers's works from the 1980s and '90s are far more abstract and exploit a greater variety of materials. Finely encrusted with sand, the surface of "Leonardo Variation III" (1982) sports pieces of weather-worn fabric. Its perfect circle of rope recalls the familiar Leonardo drawing of a man with limbs outspread to touch a circumscribed ring. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1982) draws its title from a Wallace Stevens poem; here, the canvas is divided into four sections, three of them each containing

a section of rope, and the fourth a bird's silhouette.

The work in this survey reflects a curious and playful intellect, and an instinct for limpid color. My favorite pieces add a pictorial urgency to these qualities. "Gull and Ice Floes" (1963-69), for instance, features a steady march of ice chunks across the canvas, interrupted by a single pale block that points obtusely into the blues of sea and sky.

In "Sea Breeze" (1961), a figure holds aloft a towel that, rippled by the wind, turns into a staccato progression of stark lights and muted grays. And in "Moon Dog" (1961), a large canine, tightly foreshortened, becomes a knotted ball of galloping energy, pinned in place by contrasting bands of beach, surf, water, and sky. At these moments, all intrigues give way to the sheer strangeness of visual impressions.

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Tara Donovan's "Untitled (Plastic Cups)"does for installation art what the Luminists did for landscape painting - she creates magic by applying herself in extraordinary fashion to the ordinary.

Ms. Donovan's previous projects have employed drinking straws, paper plates, or pushpins, stacked or glued together by the thousands to create unexpectedly engrossing forms and environments. For this project, she used identical plastic cups - some 3 million of them - placed regularly rim-to-rim to fill a 50-foot-by-60-foot section of PaceWildenstein's space on West 22nd Street.

The cups are stacked to varying heights of up to 4 or 5 feet, producing long arcs of undulating, translucent hills and valleys. Only about 6 feet of bare floor remains on the far sides of the installation, meaning that these humblest of objects, in their coordinated numbers, dominate a vast space. They seem to spread as a single organism, like a coral reef built of countless units whose individuality becomes apparent - startlingly so - only at close quarters.

Two stacked cups are less translucent than one, and three still less so, so that the peaks turn gradually more clouded, while the dark cement of the floor dimly colors the valleys. At the height of 100 or 200 cups, each stack begins to bend, but remains supported by neighboring, contrarily swaying towers, giving the effect of erupting pinnacles.

Who would have dreamt up such performances from a plastic cup? Thanks to Ms. Donovan, we may pause, ever so slightly, before discarding that next drink at a gallery opening.

*Vevers until April 29 (958 Madison Avenue, between 75th and 76th Streets,212-628-4000). Prices: $10,000-$60,000. Donovan until April 22 (545 W. 22nd Street, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-989-4258). The gallery declined to disclose the price.*