

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

FINE ART | By Peter Plagens

Small Studies, Gentle Irony And Considerable Hipness

Peter Blume

◆ **ACA Galleries**
 529 W. 20th St., (212) 206-8080
 Through Feb. 14

Sometimes an artist is remembered mostly for just one work. Such is the case with Peter Blume (1906-1992) and "The Eternal City" (1934-37), which is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. It's a hard-core, painstakingly realistic, Surrealist painting with a garishly lipsticked, green head of Mussolini as a jack-in-the-box popping up from the Colosseum that, once seen, isn't easily forgotten. By the time it was first shown—in the year it was completed—at the Julian Levy Gallery in Manhattan, Blume's style had already drifted toward something more painterly, though still solidly representational.

Blume, who emigrated from Russia to Brooklyn when he was 6 years old and had studied at the Art Students League, was never a prolific painter. He favored long-term painting projects and made endless drawings and small studies for them; such works constitute the majority of this show. (There is a big Blume retrospective up until mid-April at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, which may account for the somewhat leftover flavor of this exhibition.)

The artist spent a year in Italy on a Guggenheim fel-

lowship in 1932 and was thoroughly familiar with Classical anatomy and Renaissance chiaroscuro and perspective. At the same time, he was also drawn to folk art and the rebellious aspect of Modernism. Blume said, "I am not at all ashamed of 'telling stories' in my paintings, because I consider this to be one of the primary functions of the plastic arts." Perhaps he knew too many things to reconcile them all in his paintings. The result of that cogitating, in such works as "Study for Recollection of the Flood" (1967) and "Study for Boulders of Avila" (1975), is a combination of sensitive composition and over-reiteration with paint, which makes the show visually nutritious, but not thrilling.

David Weiss: Works, 1968-1979

◆ **Swiss Institute**
 18 Wooster St., (212) 925-2035
 Through Feb. 22

Art students ought to hurry

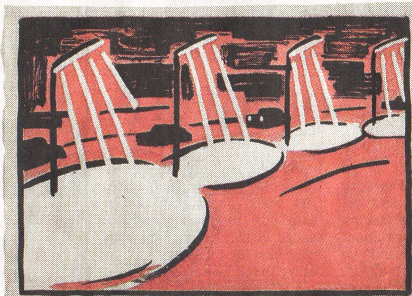
down to the Swiss Institute and steal ideas from its exhibition of the early works of David Weiss (1946-2012). Rarely will they, or anyone else, encounter such a rich trove of high-level whimsy, visual wit and gentle irony.

Weiss, the Zurich-born son of a minister and a schoolteacher, essentially began as a hippie. He was a member of a famous commune, ran a macrobiotic store, and palled around with anarchists. In 1979, he began collaborating with Peter Fischli, and together they made one of the most popular art films ever, "The Way Things Go" (1987). It is a 30-minute Rube-Goldbergesque sequence of ordinary objects causing ramps to teeter-totter, chemicals to spill and things on wheels to roll downhill, all with comic consequences. (Everybody I know who has seen the film loves it.)

Before his long partnership with Mr. Fischli, however, Weiss was a painter, printmaker, draftsman, designer and fount of visual ideas meriting mention in the same breath as Paul Klee. Lyrically simple gouache-and-ink renditions of pools of street-lamp light, sketchbook riffs on Mickey Mouse and bits of handwritten poetry—well, words—are present in abundance, in vitrines and on the wall. Some might quibble that there are too many



Above, Peter Blume's "Study for Recollection of the Flood" (1967) is at ACA Galleries through Feb. 14. Below left, an untitled and undated work by David Weiss is at the Swiss Institute through Feb. 22.



Estate of David Weiss

items in the show and, yes, the friezes of small drawings go on a little long. But the exhibition is so much fun—yes, fun—that too much is almost not enough.

Ricardo Gonzalez: Rot Open in Bliss

◆ **Asya Geisberg Gallery**
 537B W. 23rd St., (212) 675-7525
 Through Jan. 31

I imagine this occurs all too frequently with casual viewers who happen to wander into an exhibition of considerable hipness that, at the same time, offers little, if any, evidence of discernible skills

or workmanship: You ask yourself, "Am I a reactionary philistine for not seeing much to like or admire in these paintings?" Even professional gallery-goers like me occasionally wonder if what we first see as faults are actually virtues. Perhaps what initially strikes us as slapdash painting is actually a deliberate challenge to our habituation to slicker art, and maybe even a trenchant comment on The Way We Live Now.

Ricardo Gonzalez (b. 1977) raises such doubts. He paints large, roughly fleshed-out stick figures in black, against expediently sparse

ochre-and-white backgrounds. They're comically menacing, in the spirit of the show's title, which is a sentence lifted from Anthony Burgess's dystopian novel, "A Clockwork Orange." They look as though they took about a half-hour each to paint, which I presume is part of Mr. Gonzalez's artistic point.

The question is, are these pictures aesthetically and intellectually "tough"—are they challenging us to explore difficult terrain?—or are they merely fashionable? The odds for me run 60/40 to the latter.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.

ACA Galleries, New York