COMMUNICATING VESSELS
ED BISESE, ELYSE HARRISON, WAYNE PAIGE

Curated by Claudia Rousseau, PhD
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American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART
FOREWORD

The Alper Initiative for Washington Art was created and endowed to contextualize our regional artists in space and time, geography and style, the better to enable the interpretation and appreciation of their work. Claudia Rousseau does this job beautifully in her essay accompanying Communicating Vessels: Ed Bisese, Elyse Harrison, Wayne Paige. Dr. Rousseau connects these contemporary artists with Surrealist ideas coming out of Europe after the first world war, and cannily relates them to the Chicago Imagists of the 1960s and ‘70s. Just as the Hairy Who and their Chicago friends reacted against the increasing art world hegemony of abstraction, minimalism, Pop Art, and the draining of expressive content, artists in our region were pushing back against the cool, corporate, contentless abstractions of the Washington Color School and their followers.

There has always been a strong figurative opposition party in Washington, and at the far fringes of that party were a band of quirky surrealists who hung out at Gallery Rebecca Cooper, Pyramid Galleries, and Gallery K in the early to mid-70s. These were the artistic godparents of Bisese, Harrison, and Paige, best represented by Lisa Brotman and William Newman (members of the cheekily named Washington Color Pencil School), and Portuguese artist Margarida Kendall, who arrived in DC in the early 70s. All three were associated with the dearly departed Corcoran Gallery and College of Art. They are still making powerful and provocative art today.

On behalf of the students and friends of American University, we are grateful to artist and philanthropist Carolyn Alper and her family for providing this vital space for Washington art. Thanks again to The Wolpoff Family Foundation for helping to fund the Alper Initiative catalogs. And thank you to all our members who continue to support us with their contributions and enthusiasm for our mission.

Jack Rasmussen
Director and Curator
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC
The title of this exhibit is borrowed from that of a book written in 1932 by Surrealist poet André Breton (1896–1966), who in turn had borrowed it from a scientific experiment of the same name. The experiment shows that in two vessels joined by a tube, a gas or liquid passing from one to the other rises to the same level, whatever the shape of the vessel. For Breton, the phrase refers to the artist, whether literary or visual, whose work results from communication between the inner life of the mind, emotions and dreams, and the waking perception of the exterior world. The three artists in this exhibit all work from this premise, although with individual styles and imagery. While their work shows continuity with Surrealist ideas of the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s, it is also related to the Chicago Imagists of the 1960s and ’70s, and reflects the demonstrable prevalence of surrealist imagery in contemporary visual art.

To attempt any analysis of what surrealism in contemporary art might be, we must first establish an understanding of what it was when Breton invented the term in France in 1924. At its inception, between the two world wars that ravaged Europe with unprecedented violence and horror, it was a movement in literature and the visual arts that deliberately defied convention and accepted notions of reason. Yet its members were not focused on negation, but on what they saw as a positive reaction against a pervasive belief in science and technological progress, the “rationalism” that, they held, had guided European culture and politics for the previous century or more, resulting in the carnage and destruction of World War I. Breton’s Surrealist Manifesto of 1924 presented the goal of the movement as a means to reunite the conscious and unconscious realms of experience so fundamentally that the world of the imagination could be joined to the ordinary, rational world in what he termed “an absolute reality; a surreality.” He also believed that this alteration of consciousness could in some way have an influence on society as a whole, such that it could provoke fundamental, positive changes. For the artists involved in the movement, Surrealist practices, influenced in large part by the theories of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), were a liberating starting point for exploration of their own conscious and unconscious minds, and the expression of complicated psychological themes through various formal means, whether in words or images, or both. With its emphasis on content, free association, and automatic processes in creating works of art, Surrealism represented the major alternative to the contemporary and highly formalist Cubist movement. Thus, it was largely the means by which figuration and content persisted in modern painting into the following decades.
Surrealism therefore emerged as the artistic alternative to the dominant political and cultural forces of the 1920s; forces that led to the very conditions that would explode in World War II. Its Marxist-influenced visions of the advent of a new societal reality were symptomatic of the historical moment, but the freedom of thought it espoused—despite Breton’s insistence on doctrinal allegiance—that led to internal fracturing—and its encouragement of methodological experimentation provided its adherents with an avenue for prompting personal psychic investigation and understanding. It is these aspects of Surrealism that have had the greatest influence on later art of almost every kind from the visual and literary arts to theater, music, and film.

While the influence of European Surrealism on American art following World War II has been both affirmed and disputed, in terms of some of the fundamental aspects of Abstract Expressionism there is an undeniable affinity. The Surrealists’ interest in the primitive, in myth and symbolism, and their fundamental advocacy of freedom of method must be seen as at least an inspiration for artists like Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997). This is not the place to debate these questions. However, the manner in which abstraction became the dominant mode in American painting of the 1950s, itself leading to an increasing loss of content and ultimately to minimalist forms, left the window open for a younger generation of artists to seek a completely different kind of stylistic expression. Among these were a group of artists known as the Chicago Imagists, many of whom were just graduating from art school around 1960. As all three of the painters in this exhibit have mentioned influence from this movement, it merits some attention here.

The Chicago Imagists were related to the contemporaneous international phenomenon of Pop Art, the first evidence of which in the United States were paintings by Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997) based on comic strip characters that showed in New York in 1962. Warhol gave up the comic strip characters in favor of the flat representation of soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles, and celebrities, based on photo silkscreen reproduction and repetition. It can be argued that much of the Pop and Hyperrealist art of the 1960s and ’70s in that, through its repetition and deadpan representation of objects and people, content was being thoroughly drained from the image.

In Chicago, the way the Imagists used popular sources and what they did with them was quite different. About a decade younger than the New York Pop artists, their work was inspired by pinball machines, commercial signs, Outsider and tribal arts, comic strips

Wayne Paige grew up in Chicago. From his childhood in the early 1950s, he recalls the rather bizarre environment he was exposed to, and the way that it stimulated his imagination. He watched couples going in and out of a dance hall directly across the street from where he lived. His bedroom was right above his grandmother’s tavern from which he could hear the patrons from a nearby factory singing and laughing during the night. Nearby there was a three-story waterfall commercial park that had holiday lights year-round, lawn animals, and an assortment of other strange items. He remembers seeing a lion for sale at a nearby pet shop. Therefore, although he wasn’t part of the Chicago Imagist group, he was exposed and reacted to the same kind of sources that fascinated them. In school, he soon became intrigued by the European Surrealists whose work served as a stimulus for the development of his own very personal brand of surreal imagery. He has been attracted to the graphic work of M.C. Escher (1898-1972) as well as by the style and color theories of Georges Seurat (1858-1891). Paige has adapted and personalized Seurat’s pointillist techniques and, since the mid 90s, has restricted the color palette of his paintings to the complementaries of orange and blue, to which only black and white are added.
The selection of Paige’s work in this exhibition covers the development of content and style in his work since 2001. The earliest painting in the show, *The Road Home*, establishes the limited color as well as the depiction of a strange and dangerous world inhabited by small versions of his signature figure based on an old-fashioned wooden clothespin. Black silhouetted animals are outlined in orange against a landscape of flame-like brushstrokes that culminate in dotted hillsides. The whole has a haunted feeling of an inexplicable narrative that seems utterly contrary to the indication in the title. Paige’s aim to integrate spirituality and mythology into his work is among the most important origins of his iconography. For example, *The Blessing of the Snakes* (2002) is a multi-paneled work specifically recreating a folk spiritual narrative from Greece that, nevertheless, would appear to turn the traditional symbolism of serpents upside down.

The artist’s ambivalent attitude toward the developments of the digital age, with all of its threats as well as its benefits, is most completely indicated in his numerous pen and ink drawings. Working with what he calls his “celestial inkwell,” since 1997 he has created a series of these works in which his clothespin figures enact stories in an inventive but often hostile world filled with 0s and 1s. Paige’s figures react to circumstances, whether frightening or comforting, with surprising expressiveness given the simplicity of their form. Often of very small size, the density of the stippling and crowded symbolic imagery in these drawings is compelling, drawing in the viewer to try to unpack their meaning. Some of his later paintings in this exhibit, including the very recent *Neglecting the Obvious While Taking a Celestial Plunge* (2019) enlarge the scale of these works, but maintain a sense of mystery and hard to explain mythology.

Wayne Paige, *Neglecting the Obvious While Taking a Celestial Plunge*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 2 panels, 100 x 25 in. overall.

Elyse Harrison was born in Brooklyn, NY but grew up in Silver Spring, MD. Hers was a family of creative people who encouraged her independent exploration of both art and music. Although she studied art at Montgomery College for a couple of years, she considers herself an outsider and an autodidact. Unlike most, she declined an art school degree for disciplined practice and personal inquiry. Harrison spent many years studying the piano, but she preferred the complexities of Scott Joplin’s ragtime piano compositions over the keyboard variations of Bach. She was developing her own path in visual art at about the time the Pattern and Decoration movement was sweeping the contemporary art scene. Its leaders from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s were artists like Miriam Shapiro (1923–2015) and Judy Chicago (b. 1939), who considered P&D a feminist political statement that challenged dominant assumptions about pattern and decorative arts as strictly feminine, and therefore were either to be considered “craft” or simply inferior. Taking a totally opposing view, they sought to erase distinctions between craft and “high art,” finding inspiration in arts of all cultures. Harrison’s own upbringing had included a Russian grandmother who taught her how to sew on an old treadle machine, instilling in her a love of textiles and decorative patterns that would give her a lifelong inclination towards using pattern in her work. Her enduring love of music is another source for this. Listening to jazz and other contemporary forms as she works, Harrison hears the patterns in them as design layers which she translates into the forms of her paintings. Although her sources do include the Chicago Imagists, comics, and contemporary design, her art comes from a deeper place. She has expressed an enduring connection to the European Surrealists who, she has said “worked without regard for convention and favored the interplay of conscious reality and subconscious dreams in their work.” Paintings like *Four Anchors Holding a Dream* (2018), *The Magic Sense of Things*, and *Speak Silence* (2019) may betray Harrison’s affinity with traditional Surrealist themes, while *The Narcissist, Boxed or The Comfort Seeker* (2018) feature characters that seem to personify more contemporary psychological complexes.

Like Paige, Harrison is a prolific artist and teacher of young people whose style has evolved in an interesting trajectory. In the past, her work evidenced more texture, and includes her “Aviary” of doll-like bird sculptures made with wood, wire and fabric. Her new work represented in this exhibit is characterized by simplified, abstracted figures and a smooth acrylic surface. Although far more imaginative, stylistically, they are perhaps closest to the more recent paintings of Jim Nutt who, for the past two decades, has concentrated on female heads painted in a similarly clean-edged style with only minimal distortion. On occasion, like Paige, she also employs a meticulous, even exacting method of stippling or dotting that provides intriguing environments for the characters she invents. Harrison’s paintings are inspired by nature and the world of the imagination, combining the cerebral and the intuitive, the witty and the serious.
Ed Bisese is a native of the Washington, DC region. He holds a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and works as a landscape architect in addition to painting. He wrote his MFA thesis at the University of Maryland—College Park on Jim Nutt after hearing the artist refuse to explain his paintings in an artist’s talk. The influence of Nutt’s earlier work, especially the grotesque male figures he frequently painted, is evident in much of Bisese’s painting. Yet, of the three artists in this exhibit, Bisese’s extended series focused on the “Bunnyman” character shows him to be perhaps closest to the legacy of the Surrealists, and defining the idea of a contemporary figurative surrealism among local artists. The “Bunnyman” was a creation based on a papier-mâché rabbit the artist was given some years ago. Inspired by it, Bisese imagined a kind of hero legend for him. Ungainly and not very bunny-like, he is an anthropomorphic rabbit that goes on a journey and has strange interactions with nature and other creatures in this dream environment. These are painted on unstretched canvas punctured with grommets for hanging like banners. Three paintings from this series are in this exhibit: Away (2016), Raven (2019) and Return (2017). They show Bisese’s strong relationship to surrealist vocabulary of the incongruent and the mythical, sometimes paired with text that is not explanatory. In Away we see Bunnyman departing on a tortoise, armed with his walking stick and his bag, in a smoothly painted simplified landscape setting. In Return we see him slogging through the mud in rain boots, dreaming about his home in a painted bubble, and the word “RETURN” before him. However, it is in Raven that we have an image that seems most to reference surrealist precedents. Bunnyman confronts an anthropomorphic raven, dressed in a black suit and holding an umbrella, who seems to proffer a magic triangle that hangs in the air between them. The entranced Bunnyman extends his hand. The fantastic narrative implied here represents another level of the mythic in Bisese’s series. In addition, it may be considered the first appearance of a bird figure in his work, reminiscent of Max Ernst’s (1891–1976) bird character/alter ego, Loplop.

During 2016, Liza Kirwin, the artist’s wife, began painting an ongoing series of very small panel pictures of Maryland birds. She does this while watching the evening news, marking each one on the back with notes about a particular piece of news. The birds are painted in a highly naturalistic style, possibly as a statement of protest for environmental protection. In response to this, and perhaps recalling Ernst, Bisese began a series of small stretched canvases with bird-like single figures painted in a completely different style from that of the Bunnyman series. They are abstracted and painted in a chromatic range that is in itself reminiscent of exotic plumage. I have selected a group of these paintings for this exhibit, not only because they represent Bisese’s most recent work, but because they show a new turn in his relationship to Surrealism.

The characters represented in this group are variously slightly comical and strange. A single frontal eye—interestingly parallel to some of Harrison’s figures—peers out of a profile head, as in Holding (2018) and Polaroid (2019); both somewhat psychologically ambivalent creatures. Polka Chick (2019) is a bit more humorous, but just as fragile. What makes these characters compelling is the way that they explore psychological states in images that attract a longer look with their visual appeal. Bisese’s handling here is more painterly and textural than Harrison’s, but there is clearly an affinity between them, although previously unknown to the artists.

This last point brings me to a conclusion that the three artists in this exhibit have been working in what may be seen as a definite trend in recent years towards a new popularity of figurative surrealist imagery. One could argue that its conceptual basis never completely disappeared, but in organizing this exhibit I have been struck by the number of artists in the Washington, DC area alone that are working in this vein, and by the number of exhibitions and publications everywhere dealing with this artistic phenomenon. It is a pleasure to present these works here with the support of the Alper Initiative at the American University Museum.

Claudia Rousseau, PhD
November, 2019
END NOTES

1 Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité, si l’on peut ainsi dire. André Breton, Manifeste du Surréalisme, 1924.


4 Harrison was one of nineteen local artists in Personal Patterns, an exhibit I organized and curated for the King Street Gallery in the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Art Center of Montgomery College in Silver Spring in 2015, accompanied by an illustrated catalogue.

5 Artist’s statement. Cf. p. 29.
COMMUNICATING VESSELS
ED BISESE, ELYSE HARRISON, WAYNE PAIGE
One evening a group of graduate students were discussing the never-ending art school question, “What is Art?” It doesn’t seem a particularly hard question. The answer just has to be broad and general. It only has to apply to all of humanity through all of time across all cultures. “Art is communication,” one student volunteered. The professor looked with disappointment and ended the conversation with, “No, it’s not.”

That professor was wrong. Artists “communicate” by crafting images that present ideas or expression to the world. Human beings excel at communicating. Most people are proficient at language. Words are abstractions of thought. They say or write out what they want to express. People can decide to distill language into forms as concise as poetry or expand a story to fill a book. Not every creative person is drawn to using words. Visual artists communicate with imagery. They make pictures to tell a story.

Paintings can express something as direct as how beautiful a color is or create a two-dimensional illusion that can be read visually. The visual elements arranged by the artist must be interpreted in order for us to discern for ourselves the artist’s intention. Reading artwork depends on an open mind, a lifetime of looking, and a willingness to go outside of word-bound communication. Visual elements and how they are arranged tell us subject, theme, expression, and the meaning of artwork much the way that combinations of letters across pages can be read as written language.

Born in Bainbridge, Maryland, exactly one year before the launch of Sputnik, Ed Bisese grew up in Norfolk, Virginia, the second of nine siblings. He completed a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture degree at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and an MFA from The University of Maryland, College Park. He wrote his master’s thesis on the Chicago Imagist Jim Nutt after hearing Nutt’s reluctance to explain his paintings during an artist’s talk.

The artist paints in the basement studio under his house in College Park, Maryland. The cool, dark, and quiet basement is a perfect environment to spin tales of a humorous personal world composed of equal parts wonder and paranoia.

Ed Bisese is known for imaginary portraits and humorous narrative paintings. His work has been widely exhibited in the Mid-Atlantic region and occasionally on the West Coast. Currently, he teaches drawing, painting, and design at George Mason University and other area colleges. The experience reinforces his desire to facilitate a universal unlocking of creative potential. As a registered Landscape Architect in the State of Maryland, he has worked on hundreds of private residences in the Washington, DC region. He is married to a woman he adores and has an equestrian daughter of whom he is extremely proud.


Ed Bisese, Polkadot, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 14 x 14 in.
Ed Bisese, Con Boat, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 14 x 14 in.

Ed Bisese, Polka Chick, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 14 x 14 in.
In every facet of my life as an artist, I see the world as both logical and mysterious. My work speaks to this dichotomy by depicting ordinary human perceptions through extraordinary characters. I employ bold color and patterns in my paintings, which serve as a foundation for the solitary, absurd and determined characters I invent.

It is easy for me to form a kinship with surrealist artists from the early part of the 20th century who worked without regard for convention and favored the interplay of conscious reality and subconscious dreams in their work. These artists, like me, whether as an act of rebellion or a preference for shaping the familiar into something new, succeeded in producing work that bends reality. I feel at home in this form of expression, one which reinforces my tendency to make pictures of unfamiliar, strange characters who are captured in moments of everyday personal reflections.

I am attracted to the hard-edged, precise techniques found in pop art, graphic design and comic art which I utilize to produce direct, evenly painted canvasses. The results are beguilingly simple, an easy gateway for the more complex psychological themes that stir beneath the surfaces of my work.

Elyse Harrison has been producing and exhibiting her inventive, pop surrealistic art primarily in the Washington, DC area since the mid 1970s. Her work includes both fine art paintings and commercially commissioned site-specific murals. She is the recipient of four Individual Artist Grants from The Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, Maryland and has produced ten murals for The Maryland State Arts Council’s Artists in Education Program. Her art has been reviewed in The Washington Post, the Gazette Newspapers, Modernism Magazine and The Baltimore City Paper. She was the owner/operator of Gallery Neptune, a regional contemporary gallery from 2003–2010, and the owner/operator of Studio Neptune, an art education program from 1990–2017, both located in downtown Bethesda, Maryland.

Elyse Harrison, My Desired Frequency, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 in.

Growing up in Chicago in the early 1950s, I was exposed to a stimulating and colorful urban environment that nurtured my youthful imagination and later served as a sustained source of inspiration. In looking back, I remember the joy of looking through my bedroom window at a dance hall directly across the street from where I lived and seeing couples entering and exiting during the night and hearing the patrons from a nearby factory conversing, laughing, and singing in my grandmother’s tavern beneath my bedroom. A few blocks away, nature presented itself in the form of a theatrically embellished three-story waterfall commercial park that included holiday lights, lawn animals, and an occasional teepee. I also remember a lion being for sale along with other exotic animals at a local pet shop. All this seemed so normal at the time. Nevertheless, my appetite had been whetted and my surrealistic journey had begun.

Two decades later and after moving to Washington, DC for graduate school, I became intrigued with and influenced by the art of the Surrealists (Man Ray, Dalí, Escher) and Seurat. Seurat? His pointillism along with his pixel-like brushstrokes and color theory studies portended the digital age. My exposure to these artists and my personal quest for integrating spirituality and mythology into my work laid the foundation, and ever since then I have been weaving conflict, dreams, and humor into my art along with a skewed perception of contemporary society and a bittersweet attitude towards science and technology.

My career as an exhibiting artist extends back to the mid 1970s and includes twenty-five solo exhibitions, numerous gallery and museum exhibitions (the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Anderson Gallery, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center). Additional noteworthy exhibitions and awards include Washington Art Matters II: 1940s-1980s at the American University Museum, First Prize in The Fairfax Art Council awards, First Prize in The George Washington University Alumni Competition, and a Special Recognition award from The Virginia Commission of the Arts. Collectors include American University, the George Washington University, Marymount University, the Elisabeth French Collection, the Gudelsky Collection, Radio One, and Prudential.
Wayne Paige, Floating 8, 2012. Oil on canvas, 3 panels, 40 x 50 in. each.

Wayne Paige, Neglecting the Obvious While Taking a Celestial Plunge, 2019. Oil on canvas, 2 panels, 100 x 25 in. overall.

Wayne Paige, The Blessing of the Snakes, 2002. Oil on canvas, 8 panels, 6 x 4 in. each.
Wayne Paige, Flames Fantastique, 2013. Ink drawing on paper, 6 x 4 in.

Wayne Paige, The Portal, 2017. Ink drawing, shadowbox frame, meteorite fragments, 14 x 11 x 1 1/2 in.
CLAUDIA ROUSSEAU

Claudia Rousseau was born and raised in New York City. From a very young age she was exposed to, and fascinated by, all the art resources available there. She eventually attended the High School of Art & Design, but giving up the idea of becoming an artist, she completed a BA in art history at Hunter College (City University of New York) and then both MA and PhD in art history at Columbia University in New York. She has taught at Washington University in St. Louis, at the University of Bonn and at the Kunsthistorisches Institute of the Freie Universität in Berlin, as well as in study abroad programs in Italy. In fall 2019 she became Professor Emerita of Art History at Montgomery College (Silver Spring, MD) where she has been teaching since 2001. She serves on the Public Art Trust Steering Committee of the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County, as well as the Public Art Review Panel of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

Her interests are, and have been, unusually broad in the fields of art history and criticism. An internationally published scholar of sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance art, her work has focused largely on topics associated with astrological iconography of that period. In addition, Dr. Rousseau has published widely in modern and contemporary art. She is a recognized art critic, as well as curator of numerous art exhibits in the Washington, DC area. In 2010 she was voted membership in the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) for her writing on art. She is currently editor-at-large of East City Art, an online publication covering art exhibitions and events in the DMV region.

October, 2019
MISSION STATEMENT

The Alper Initiative for Washington Art promotes an understanding and appreciation of the art and artists of the Washington Metropolitan Area. We provide and staff a dedicated space located within the American University Museum, to present exhibitions, programs, and resources for the study and encouragement of our creative community.