



*Magnetism*, oil on Wood, 1998, 72 x 96 inches

## Paintings by Joan Banach at Mario Diacono Gallery

by Randy Garber

Banach's provocative and penetrating work is as much about the entrapment of women within the confines of gender, history and class as it is about what Diacono calls in his accompanying essay "dilapidated memory." Thematically, the paintings seduce viewers into their complicated world of gender poses, where figures seem to be captured—and frozen—in a moment of desire. They yearn, through dramatic gesture, to be released from the stasis that imprisons them; i.e., being locked in by historical time. Pictorially, the paintings confront the viewer with unsettling contradictions about the process of painting itself—monochrome, "deadened" palette punctuated with nodes of saturated color and places where the almost raw wood panel is as much a part of the surface as the carefully modulated and rendered painted parts are.

In his rich essay, Diacono situates Banach within the essentially male-artist dominated line-up of Modernism and Modernity (he refers to Manet, Mondrian, Pollock, Richter, Baselitz, Polke and Kiefer). He reminds us that painting "history" has followed a continuum of movements and anti-movements and suggests that Banach's work departs from this with "no linear commitment other than to an investigation of the subconscious of painting." He concludes—and I believe too generally and reductively—stating that, "These are of course Freudian waters, the waters of subconscious memories out of which every significant picture of the future is made. After the massive consumption of all art-historical epochs and styles they have become the only usable past that has been left to painting."

There is no disputing Diacono's observations that Banach's work is about the clairvoyance of painting—bringing together the past and suggesting the future. And too, I agree that her method of painting underscores this notion of "materializing" memory. However, I think Diacono misses a very important aspect of Banach's work by not discussing it in terms of gender as well as some "still usable" particular periods of history.

All the works (perhaps with the exception of *Salt*) in this fine show use the same uterine shape as a key organizing thread between the paintings as well as forming the environments—context—within each. All the paintings (including *Salt*) present figures that are disembodied either literally or psychologically. And in all, Banach employs exaggerated gesture and vague references to history to heighten dramatic tension within each painting.

In *Magnetism*, we see the half-formed figure of a woman dressed in what appears to be a man's trench coat. Head thrown back, she harkens us to recall an era of Marlene Dietrich feminine wiles, a time when women's power was concentrated in the self-exploitation of stereotypical female behaviors. But also, like Marlene Dietrich herself, Banach's painted figure bends gender within her high-glamour effect. The figure's stance and dominant compositional presence is echoed in the uterine shapes that surround it. The lily images that float around the figure do—as Diacono posits—suggest ears but also remind us of a sort of hermaphroditic phallus/vagina. And indeed, what confronts us in the (dead) center of the painting is a sketched penis shape pushing lightly against a white "V" shape of cloth.

In *Salt*, the figures are distorted, aborted and amputated. Lined up on a shelf suggesting the Victorian bourgeois obsession with collecting, they imply the commodification of women. Partitioning has always been a powerful tool of the ruling classes, and Banach reinforces this idea by dividing the composition both vertically and horizontally. The vertical division works to set up the staging Diacono mentions in his essay. And the horizontal arrangement, with the cut-out figures flanking the dolls (or girls) reminds us that it was (is) women who have been cut in half (the sizzling salt line divides the girls). In contrast, and indeed what informs this interpretation, is that the male "cut-outs" on the right side are presented intact.

*Deep Water* presents us with the iconographic uterine shape stretched to now become the rubbery, self-enclosed environment that may indeed expand, but will inevitably snap back to form the contained saucer (i.e., world) we see in *Drift*. In *Deep Water* the gesture and expression of the levitating head recalls St. John the Baptist and the face of religious ecstasy we find on some martyred saints in Medieval and Renaissance painting. But Banach paints this head as though it is a 1920 French circus mannequin. Deliberate red cartoon mouth and red clown eyes challenge us to think again about gender signifiers and the worlds that may contain us when we use them.

In *Drift*, the figure stands dramatically and ambiguously on the edge of the saucer shape. Now draped in a cloak that could as easily be a 19th-century gentleman's cape or a cleric's garb, this woman-like figure looks away from us toward a constrained, limited future. There is no way out here.

In *Colony*, Banach gives us a full and buoyant explosion of the shapes. They float as bubbles and eyes forming a world in which the three "sirens" are submerged. Here, with their vampish dark nail polish (again another gender signifier), each figure pantomimes a stereotypical feminine gesture: One is dancing in reverie, one dramatically "holds" a phantom cigarette (reminding us of the Hollywood pose in *Magnetism*), and one adopts the gesture of looking in a mirror. Though clustered together, each is decidedly alone. Given the large, smiling, omnipotent faces suggesting the forces of advertising (or some sort of "ruling" or controlling class) at the top of the painting, I think we are meant to read the three female figures as again trapped by forces greater than themselves. The painting's dramatic tension is sustained by the fluidity and movement that the bubbles present and the essentially static (and once again) self-contained orb of each woman-figure.

Despite some technical distractions (e.g., nicks in the wood surface, body parts poorly rendered), the show is intellectually stimulating and, for the most part, visually engaging. These are large, brave paintings about important subject matter. Banach not only pricks our subconscious anxieties about gender, but also prompts us to consider the cultural and historical arenas in which these anxieties get played out.