

## *Caught in the Middle of Irony and Tragedy* *Exhibitions of Grisha Bruskin, Daniel Rich and Harvey Quaytman*

By PETER PLAGENS  
Feb. 28, 2014 6:35 p.m. ET

Grisha Bruskin: H-Hour  
Marlborough  
40 W. 57th St., (212) 541-4900  
Through March 15



One certainly has to give Marlborough Gallery credit for creating a dramatic setting for Grisha Bruskin's exhibition. The walls are painted black, quotes from the artist and a couple of intellectual luminaries are printed in white on the walls, and a monitor plays a slickly done video with zooms, pans, lap-dissolves and a voice-over elaborating upon the art. The artist, too, brings quite a bit to the show in terms of his own history.

Mr. Bruskin (b. 1945) studied art at the Moscow Textile Institute and, while still in his 20s, became a member of the Soviet Artists' Union. A few of his early exhibitions were closed down by the government, but he persevered long enough to see his large satirical painting "Fundamental Lexicon" (an ironic grid of schematic propaganda figures) sell for almost \$500,000 at Sotheby's breakthrough auction in Moscow in 1988. Subsequently, Mr. Bruskin was commissioned to create an installation in the new Reichstag in Berlin and, then two years ago, was awarded the Kandinsky Prize, the pre-eminent award in Russian contemporary art.

Despite Mr. Bruskin's credentials and the show's theatrical staging, "H-Hour" boils down to about 40 table-top-size bronze sculptures—on the floor or set out at different heights—of various mutated animals and ominous, armed or armored persons. It's supposed to amount to a profoundly scary rumination on war, or at least the bad

things that people will do to one another whenever the generals tell them to do so. The trouble is that this sculpture is neither smoothly cartoonish enough to be wickedly ironic (as with the work of another Marlborough sculptor, the witty Tom Otterness) nor roughly hewn enough to be tragic. It sits firmly in the middle, in an environment that overwhelms it.



Daniel Rich: Systematic Anarchy

Peter Blum

20 W. 57th St., (212) 244-6055

Through March 15

# Joshua Liner Gallery

Daniel Rich (b. 1977) paints architecture the way that architects build it: on top of a sturdy, underlying armature, the exterior parts added with the click-click-click precision of metal-and-glass panels being bolted into place. Of course, it helps that Mr. Rich's astutely chosen subjects—in a lovingly installed show consisting of just five pictures—are big, late-industrial projects. They include a dusty-pink office building in Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave lying between Poland and Lithuania; close-ups of Lloyd's of London and the notorious Foxconn headquarters in China; an aerial view of Tokyo, and a look inside a giant Amazon book warehouse that might as well be a city in itself.

"Tokyo" (2013), with its eerily people-free blue and gray buildings punctuated with shafts of rusty red and buttery yellow, and "Amazon Books" (2013), a dizzying vista of ink-and-paper volumes that may make you resolve to read only on a digital tablet from here on out, are the two best works—probably because their hard-edge paint application lends them an alluring sharpness. The bits of background trees in "Kaliningrad" (2013) and the shiny, rounded balconies in "Lloyd's of London" (2014) force Mr. Rich into subjective, fuzzy gradations of paint that loosen his otherwise airtight premise. These are quibbles, though. This is a succinctly impressive example of painting being alive and well if you know where to look.

Harvey Quaytman

David McKee

745 Fifth Ave., (212) 688-5951

Through March 22

The book on the abstract painter Harvey Quaytman (1937-2002) is that he was considered by the art world to be something of an anachronism—or at least a kind of contrarian. During the public efflorescence of Color Field painting—lyrical stains of Popsicle hues—he went in for geometry. Among the geometricians with their masking-taped planes and chips of flat, bright color, Mr. Quaytman favored a kind of sculptural, faintly awkward, shaped-canvas roughness, as though he were a blacksmith trying to construct a Ferrari. And when permissiveness prevailed in the early 1990s, Mr. Quaytman retrenched to right angles, black, white, gray and brown (real rust applied to the canvas).

This museum-quality small survey, covering the years 1970-1997 (Mr. Quaytman wasn't able to work during the last few years of his life), reveals that there was nothing gimmicky about his many inventions in pictorial construction or his use of uncommon materials. Everything Mr. Quaytman made exudes a distrust of flashiness, and a quiet integrity. His work looks steadily better in retrospect.

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

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