

John Mandel: The Uncanny

Art

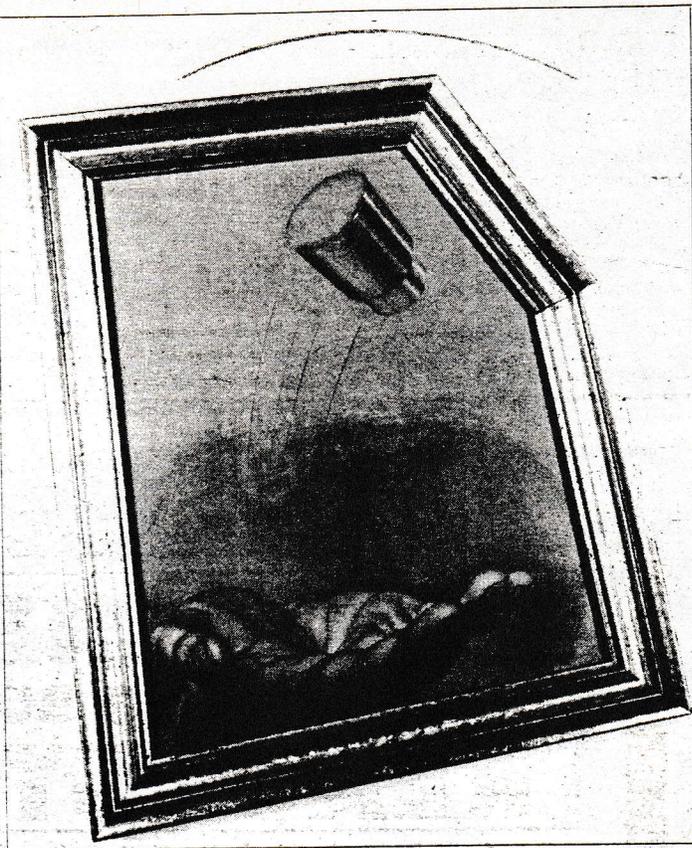
by Hunter Drohojowska

Looking at the drawings and paintings of John Mandel, the word "uncanny" comes to my mind. They are poetic pictures which seem to have been lifted from the scrapbook of collective dreams. Graphically perfect, highly legible, they all seem to recall the dramatic climax without representing the rest of the play. They are not narrative, just a series of glimpses. By combining visual references which are both easily recognizable and totally obscure, Mandel achieves a quality that is ineffable, and, as I have said, uncanny. They will be on view at the Koplins Gallery through February 5.

Sigmund Freud once wrote an essay about The Uncanny, in *Creativity and the Unconscious*, saying... "the uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind, that has been estranged only by the process of repression." In other words, the uncanny, and Mandel's art, speaks to the unconscious. The works are

familiar, and yet so strange. Each work entices viewers, only to ultimately confound them, leaving them floating in a state of ambiguity.

There are numerous young artists today who've embraced ambiguity as a stratagem to avoid aesthetic categorization. A gaggle of contradictory references in a work deny the viewer full possession. Mandel, however, goes beyond such formal ambiguity. His individuality as an artist is amplified by a clarity of execution, and a rare talent for exquisite rendering. Men, women, and sundry objects are drawn or painted with the impeccable regard of a Renaissance master. In fact, two of his most recent works have borrowed from the paintings of the 15th-century Flemish painter Hans Memling. All of the works are untitled, with parenthetical generic subtitles such as "(large madonna)." This particular canvas features the mysteriously beautiful face of Memling's Madonna, fully detailed in charcoal, though the contours of her head and halo



Untitled (Madonna with Deity) 1982

remain mere outlines.

Mandel has defaced the portrait with a small, green, grotesque mask, right in the center of the lovely forehead! The effect is not sacrilege so much as anomaly, evoking a psychological strain beyond mere stylistic ambiguity. The viewer yearns for an explanation, and myriad possibilities occur, spawned by the Christian/Pagan imagery and the mythic undertones. In the context of Mandel's other oeuvre, however, one suspects the least literal analysis to be the most correct. The mundane and the ideal are combined by Mandel in his work to mediate between that which can be spoken and that which cannot.

To the right of this canvas is a sketch for the large madonna, just a few quick lines which capture an essence which could be associated with the sublime. At the top of the composition, Mandel added "1953," a year devoid of any particular distinction. The literalness of the date secularizes the viewer's response, so

again, one is teased but diverted from expected reaction. That this approach is more than simple conceptual savvy is revealed by a group of pieces in the back room of the exhibition.

One whole wall is activated by a small oil painting depicting nothing more than the corner edge of a table and one gleaming chrome leg. Painted in subdued tones of taupe and gray, it is mounted in a trapezoidal frame of exotic wood. Reticent and minimal, the picture conveys the powerful sensation of *deja vu*, as though dislocated in time and space. I come back again to the sensation of the uncanny. Freud wrote, "It would seem as though each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive man, that none of us has traversed it without preserving certain traces of it which can be

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reactivated, and that everything that now strikes us as uncanny fulfills the condition of stirring those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression."

When one looks at this painting of a table leg, one recalls palpable sensations which come from beyond the apparent significance of this humble object. One sees a comprehensible painting which elicits incomprehensible feelings.

On the wall opposite this picture is an equally disturbing work. *Untitled* (Hand Throwing Object), shown above, is an oil of five irregular sides, framed in gold. In tones of flesh and silver, a palm is held out, fingers, toward the viewer, tossing, or catching, a small bottle-shaped object.

The indistinct background leans toward the erotic — a narrow crevice of flesh — but evades the explicit. One's curiosity is fully captured, but search as one might for solutions, it is only to be thwarted at the brink of discovery.

I think Mandel's work has more in common with what the Surrealist de Chirico termed "metaphysical painting" than superficially attached conceptualist labels. It's a beauty of strangeness, of unexpected combinations, as the Surrealist poet Lautreamont has written, "Beautiful as the chance encounter on an operating table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella." This is not to associate Mandel with Surrealism *per se* and all the baggage of literal symbols and messages which ac-

company the movement. Mandel has clearly spent considerable effort avoiding such literal specificity. It is to say that these images appear to be born of the Id, brought from the unconscious landscape to stand alone in a clear light.

The very first drawing in the exhibition depicts a man's face, his eyes squeezed shut in pain, glasses fallen to one side. There is a sense of time in suspension, as though the man doesn't want to open his eyes again, maybe never put on those glasses. For some reason, the picture conveys fear, a reluctance to return to the world, which translates as a desire to remain in the Unconscious. Is this a form of self-portraiture, or just a general observation? I do know the picture is uncanny. ■

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