

Yves Tanguy

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ART REVIEW

'ACROSS THE GENERATIONS -
SIDE BY SIDE'
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Across the Generations, Side by Side

By ROBERTA SMITH

"Affinities: Contemporary and Historic Art" at Snyder Fine Art trolls the margins of the art world to touching and instructive effect: it links the work of nine contemporary artists who are not very well known with that of artists from earlier generations whom they admire. The show has been organized by Gary Snyder, the gallery's owner, in collaboration with the younger generation of artists, most of whom he met through their repeated visits to his gallery, which specializes in under-known artists from the 1920's through the 50's.

The open acknowledgment of affinity, also known as influence, takes a certain courage, for an artist can always be outshone by his or her selected precedent. And, indeed, in several instances here, it is the older artists who prevail. The staid geometric canvases of Richard Perusse, made this year, actually seem to predate Charles Biederman's spritely knobbed relief in white, yellow and blue from about 1938, a work that is positively Neo-Geo in its crisp exuberance. Similarly, Patrick Strzelec's loose, linear abstractions pale in the company of a recent canvas by Conrad Marca-Relli that layers together collage, drawing and spray paint (although it could be said that both artists are indebted to late-40's de Kooning).

But elsewhere the pairings are often mutually illuminating. Laurie Fendrich's Cubist-flavored abstractions are clearly linked to those of George L. K. Morris and Esphyr Slobodkina from the 30's, but Ms. Fendrich is attempting a more optical layering of color and a quietly jangling composition that makes one think of stenciling as much as painting. Although visually quite different,



Photographs from Snyder Fine Art

A pairing: "Country Road," a 1943 watercolor by Milton Avery, top, and a detail from Yuri Tsuzuki's 1995 watercolor "Untitled, No. 2," on view at Snyder Fine Art.

Hannah Fink's small rustic sculptures, made of bits of found wood, share their worked surfaces and emotional innocence with the crowded figurative images of Norris Embry.

Similarly, the work of Luke Gray, a young painter, and Steve Wheeler, a leading figure of the short-lived Indian Space Painting movement of

the 1930's and 40's, seem at first to have little common ground. In fact, Mr. Gray's big, brushy, air-filled abstractions are more compatible with the loose paint-handling of de Kooning or Howard Hodgkin. Still, they convey something of the compositional complexity and coloristic richness of Wheeler's tightly wound geometries, as if grossly magnified.

In one of the exhibition's most satisfying juxtapositions, Yuri Tsuzuki's small, semi-abstract landscapes intensify the color and emotional tenor favored by Milton Avery.

Other artistic pairings, young to old, include John Obuck and Rolph Scarlett, Pat Lipsky Sutton and Ilya Bolotowsky and the photographers Anne Senstad and Naomi Savage. Ms. Savage's contributions include two hand-worked photographs, one based on a cut-paper collage (1980) and the other, dedicated to Isak Dinesen, on a painting of two African sculptures depicted in flat and overlapping silhouette. Rubbed with pastel, these images mix their media into an intriguing physical ambiguity that may qualify them as proto-post-modern.

In some ways, the show is simply a very smart way to advertise the gallery's program, to prove that the artists Mr. Snyder favors are relevant and of more than simple historical interest. But his exhibition also reminds us that at any given point in the past or present, the art world is rich with unturned stones; also, that artists, who have a special incentive to discover echoes of their own sensibilities in the recent past, are usually the best stone-turners around.

"Affinities: Contemporary and Historic Art" remains at Snyder Fine Art, 20 West 57th Street, Manhattan, through Sept. 14 (the gallery is closed from Aug. 16 through Sept. 2).