



Tom Hatten, *X*, 1979, alkyd, pencil on canvas, 45¾" by 40". Nexus Gallery.

Tom Hatten
Nexus Gallery
March 27-April 14, 1979

In 1973, Tom Hatten decided on a ten-year project — to produce every week a pair of portraits of himself and Xochitaol, his subject, wife, and collaborator. The project is now in its sixth year. There are certain practical difficulties inherent in comprehending, or even exhibiting, an enterprise such as this one. For example, the ramp at the Guggenheim will be a good quarter of a mile too short to display the completed series. Viewing the completed paintings is a singularly disconcerting experience. Such a quantity of visual data tends to make critical impressions seem very arbitrary, since they are so easily contradicted, given the unreliability of visual memory, by some other part of the visual data. Subliminal resemblances and sources flash by — to Picasso, to Manet, to Velasquez. Given an infinite number of easels and palettes, would an infinite number of monkeys eventually reproduce the lost *Calumny of Apelles*?

The recent exhibition at Nexus consisted of nine paintings and some forty related drawings, representing the period of 1978-1979 in Hatten's projected series. In these pictures, his previous format of

small, paired diptychs has been replaced by single, large, several-figure compositions. Several-figure compositions, but the paintings could hardly be called narrative. They are too fragmented internally. Scale becomes grotesquely disproportionate — for example, a foot as big as an aerial view of the river Nile. Figures dive into the canvas from top and bottom, or left and right, simultaneously. "Neither," as Hatten says in pleased tones, "makes sense to the eye." Also, his style of handling is not consistent from one painting to the next, or even within each painting: fully painted areas grate against raw canvas; impasto collides with wash.

The themes of all the pictures are the traditional ones of the painting within the painting and the artist and his model. In *20 Miles Over Japan*, a model, seated on a canvas, contemplates her own image in a second canvas, while watched by another image in a third. In *X*, the flame-like hair of the figure in one canvas sends real smoke blowing across the mirroring figure in another canvas. In one of the drawings, one figure makes love to a stylistically incompatible figure in a mirror. There is a kind of ghoulish eroticism in Hatten's work which is oddly reminiscent of the Dada painter Picabia. At any rate, his is certainly also never retinal painting.

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