

## Philip-Lorca diCorcia at PaceWildenstein

The 19 large-format Ektacolor prints shown last winter are additions to the "Street Works" series Philip-Lorca diCorcia launched in 1993. The enterprise takes off from the practice (associated with Henri Cartier-Bresson, William Klein, Garry Winogrand) of recording urban life with raw authenticity. But diCorcia is no guerrilla photographer. Impeccably composed and immaculately printed, his works have none of the grain, tilt and blur that became the hallmarks of a proudly gritty genre.

In his most talked-about departure from documentary tradition, diCorcia augments available light with strategically positioned flashes. The effect is both fascinating and alienating. Sudden detonations of illumination detach figures from their setting—making the actual street seem like a backlit projection in a studio shoot—or pinpoint a single face, like the spotlight which singles out a "radiant" film diva or beatifies a character in a Caravaggesque painting.

The current group, shot between 1996 and 1998, ranges through eight cities. Most of the subjects appear unaware of diCorcia's presence but some take note, like a perplexed little girl on a shabby commercial street in L.A., and a crowd of scowling men in Calcutta who regard the intrusive photographer as if he had just disgraced their sister. An unusually pictorial image features a nonchalant smoker (flaneur or outcast from a smoke-free office?) on a

dusky London corner. In one of the crueler shots, three grinning men seem to join the photographer in mocking an aging woman outfitted in a too-vivid red dress.

Scrambled by place and year in the gallery, the photos could not be mistaken for an "essay," a sustained encounter that collectively conveys something about the life of a city. The rich color, large size and suave presentation aggrandize dispassionate images that are rife with unremarkable coincidences and incongruities. In one typical instance, the smiley-star trademark on a cup from a fast-food chain in L.A. leers at the disfigured beggar who holds it.

An accomplished visual stylist, diCorcia appears to have selected precisely those shots which make street life look the most staged, even clichéd. The 45-year-old artist is part of the generation that outed photography as a medium of manipulable truths; at times he seems in thrall to what had once been a liberating disclosure. It is tempting, therefore, to imagine the aging or seasoning of diCorcia's work. Fifty years on, will the supplemental lights matter less than the fact that the photographer really was "there" on the street? Will diCorcia the artificer be reborn as an eyewitness?

—Marcia E. Vetrocq

## Elger Esser at Sonnabend

For his first New York show, the young German photographer Elger Esser displayed 13 large color C-prints of European landscapes and towns. Esser was



Nan Goldin: *The sky on the twilight of Philippine's death, Winterthur, 1997*, Cibachrome, 30 by 40 inches; at Matthew Marks.

formerly a studio assistant to the photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, and his work, to some degree, seems influenced by their deadpan documentary style. His results, though, are quite different: his subject matter is lyrical and romantic, and each image is resolved with such soft, grainy clarity that it's hard to remember whether you're looking at photographs or paintings.

The show opened with several enigmatic landscapes that seem torn between realism and abstraction. One, taken off the coast of Scotland, depicts a blue-white body of water sandwiched between a snowbank and a pale sky overhung with clouds; from far off, it looks as though a strip has been ripped from a white cloth, revealing two swipes of blue behind it. A group of images which picture French seaside fishing villages recall Luminist landscapes. *Morbihan I*, for instance, presents a golden-green body of water whose horizon line is darkly dotted with tree-covered islands; here, the colors are so subdued that they're almost sepia-toned.

The most impressive images by far are Esser's cityscapes, many of which depict small French riverside towns. In *Mâcon*, a strip of modest buildings along a riverbank is reflected upside down in the greenish water, as it might be in a 17th-century landscape painting or an early tourist photograph. In *Gien*, an ancient stone bridge arches toward a stand of houses; behind them, a turreted castle looms. These antique-looking scenes are especially beautiful: the sky glows with a golden, pinkish light, and the old stone buildings

practically pulse with harmonious tones of gold, rose and white. Yet Esser also makes them anthropologically fascinating: the resolution is so clear and exact that it's possible to discern cars, read signs and even peer into windows—making for a delicious confusion between the town's multilayered, modern-day presence and the photograph's old-fashioned look.

The confusion intensifies in *St. André de Cubzac*, which depicts a flat bridge—perhaps a feat of 19th-century steel engineering—spanning the Dordogne. Here, the detailing is so surreally precise that it could be a computer-generated image. *Pentidattilo, Italy* pictures a Sicilian village, apparently carved from rock, perched on a craggy mountainside. Though the surrounding mountaintops recede hazily into the distance, every detail—from sunlit weeds to shady hollows—is focused so equally that the village seems almost flat. It's strange to see this ancient-looking scene represented with such hi-tech exactitude—yet it's precisely this tension between past and future, real and surreal, photography and painting, that makes Esser's photographs so riveting.

—Carol Kino

## Nan Goldin at Matthew Marks

Since the 1970s, Nan Goldin has recorded her world—one replete with lovers, junkies, transvestites, transsexuals and AIDS sufferers—in glossy Cibachrome prints, conveying a raw intimacy with her subjects that quickly placed her in the

Elger Esser: *Pentidattilo, Italy, 1998*, C-print on Diasac Face, 49 by 63 1/2 inches; at Sonnabend.





Steven Assael: *Aviva*, 1998, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 50 3/4 by 30 3/4 inches; at Forum.

image of a nighttime skinny-dipper swimming in a Day-Glo-blue grotto that is lit from above by the moon.

This meticulousness yields some remarkably polished photographs. Gone for the most part are the out-of-focus, asymmetrically composed images; in their place are crisper, clearer, more succinct works. Never lacking, however, is the immediacy evoked throughout Goldin's oeuvre. Goldin's innate ability to make the viewer feel like an "insider" who is present at the scene animates *Pawel on the beach laughing, Positano* (1996): one can almost hear the roar emerge as the subject's head is thrown back in ecstatic laughter.

A particularly moving photograph is *The sky on the twilight of Philippine's death, Winterthur* (1997), in which a breathtakingly orange yet ominous sky foreshadows the death of a friend. As Goldin continues to document her world, and the omnipresent tragedies within it, her images evince a new sublimity, solemnity and, dare we say, hopefulness.—Maura Reilly

### Steven Assael at Forum

With his latest show of recent works, Steven Assael solidified his position as a formidable young representational painter. Nowhere was his strength and clarity more apparent than in the epic-scaled (80-by-59-inch) *Johanna*, which is nothing more or less than a tribute to a dominatrix. She comes equipped with spiked necklace, black-metal arm mail, Freddy Krueger-like metal fingers and a gas mask. Behind her, to either side, are wooden male mannequins, one in shirt and jacket, the other wearing yet another uglifying gas mask. The woman's shocking red hair cascades down the painting's upper-middle register in such glowing form that the viewer can only wonder at its effulgence against the sable ground.

Assael is a great lover of chiaroscuro. This was amply demonstrated in two bold and beautiful subway paintings. In *IRT*

7, the brownish shadows around standing men and women with their shopping bags and a seated man with his newspaper seem to be cast by light from some unlikely, universal sunset that bathes all in an iridescent amber glow that is as physically revealing as it is spiritually ennobling. *D* features six seated figures in a denser sort of light. Among them are a leather-jacketed, sunglasses-sporting, long-haired young man with red scarf, an aged black woman in specs, and a small black child with her hand on her mother's knee. All seem to be gazing out at the viewer or the artist. It's safe to say that a more celestial ambience—in sienna reds!—has never graced straphangers.

Still, it's in his taste for the bizarre sublime that Assael aspires to contemporary greatness. One instance of this—and the sequel to *Johanna*—shows another Amazon cradling a naked blond youth, a pietà for our sad sex-and-drug-ridden times. And then there is the roughly 6-by-4-foot *Aviva*. Presented to us without sensationalism or censure is a nude, hugely adipose young woman who clutches an unclothed baby doll. Assael's attitude is beyond both wit and compassion. Instead, we find sympathy and a certain admiration for morbid obesity; the artist even hints at its currently taboo sexual allure. Like other romantics before him, Assael makes the awful great. He does this with an astonishing depth of feeling matched by excellence of technique.

—Gerrit Henry

### R.M. Fischer at Deitch Projects

R.M. Fischer combines odd electrical, plumbing and industrial findings into functional sculptures, most often lamps, which, in his hands, transcend their banal origins. While decidedly abstract, they also exhibit subtle robotlike qualities and are simultaneously futuristic and nostalgic. In the past, Fischer's pieces tended to be metallic and spindly, with a pugnacious faux-fascist bravado. While this most recent work retains all his trademark peculiarities, it has a decidedly feminine character and deals with a sculptural volume that is more Botero than Giacometti.

These assemblages consist of as many as 14 plastic globes,

lit from inside—the same globes, although it is not immediately obvious, that mark New York subway stations. Here, white with occasional interruptions of red and green, they resemble balloons and impart a festive air. Exquisitely finished and polished, almost like jewelry, the brass fittings make the sculptures look vaguely Victorian. The pieces are human scale, up to 6 feet tall, which adds to their anthropomorphic nature. The globes, placed to suggest breasts, buttocks and other body parts, exude a kind of antique sexuality reminiscent of turn-of-the-century erotic postcards. Looping black electrical cords some-



R.M. Fischer: *The Incandescent Ones*, 1998, polyethylene, brass, steel, electric lights, 59 by 33 by 33 inches; at Deitch Projects.

times evoke necklaces or watch chains; elsewhere, as they extend from randomly placed chrome pipe nipples, the effect is alarmingly visceral. Of course, the dominant whiteness of these works can also suggest purity, and they can also appear as innocent and asexual as snowmen.

These pieces call up the conflicting feelings another person can engender in us. Seeing this show was like being at a holiday