Emerging Artists: 19 to Watch
Paul McCarthy’s Santaland
Hoaxes, Impostors, and Pranks
Damien Hirst ❤️ Francis Bacon
Art Critics Renew Their Vows
COLIN CHILLAG

PRAFUS GALLERY

In his recent show of 12 biologically oriented paintings, the Phoenix-based painter Colin Chillag presented an outlandish depiction of human evolution. I’m an Evolutionary Biologist (2008) chronicles man’s passage from ape to human being in a style that is a cross between Mike Kelley and Jon Tenniel. Sperm bitches through cartoonish black holes that are interspersed among the branches of a heavily ornamented, archetypal Tree of Life. Cat heads, birds, fish, dogs in all shapes and sizes, and other odd life forms populate the Tree. Labels characteristic of 19th-century biology identify cartoonish slime as “jawless fishes,” “monotremes,” “nematodes,” “crustaceans,” “marsupials,” and “sponges.” Tangled bundles of worms drown beneath vegetation and the whole mess is topped off by a yellow canary trapped by a surreal, squirming cluster of eyeballs sitting on a human brain.

Nocturne in Orange and Green (2008) is set outside the 7-Eleven, its parking lot and gas pumps suffused in an eerie, fluorescent glow. The Hopperesque moodiness of the scene is intensified as one follows the hand-painted, impasto paint as it abruptly gives way to a blank gessoed canvas, onto which Chillag sketches in pencil or light paints a science textbook diagram that depicts how gas is extracted from petroleum. The shift is indicative of Chillag’s ability to negotiate between linear narrative and stasis, leading us on wild journeys into the bizarre. —LARA TAUBMAN

THE GREENROOM

CENTER FOR CURATORIAL STUDIES, BARD COLLEGE

In television parlance, the “greenroom” is where staff and guests exchange pre- and post-programming conversation—and as a title, “The Greenroom” is apt in its suggestion of the current state of contemporary documentary practice. Art produced in a documentary mode is often like an off-the-record conversation in a space between public and private productions of meaning, with the potential to be tedious or revelatory. Fortunately, this collection of historically contemplative, self-reflexive artworks tends to the latter.

Accordingly, the exhibition is billed as the catalyst for an even broader discussion: a three-year public research campaign headed by curator Maria Lind in collaboration with the artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl. It intends to reassess both the body of work produced in the wake of the recent “documentary turn” and its photographic predecessors (including Martha Rosler, Sophie Calle, Larry Clark, and others). Video most readily accommodates the discursive demands of contemporary documentary, and for that reason video works predominate, such as Steyerl’s November (2004), a postrevolutionary paean to the artist’s childhood friend Andrea Wolf, a German assassinated in Eastern Anatolia for her association with a Kurdish revolutionary group. The work shifts between deeply personal imagery (the two shot a feminist martial-arts movie together as teenagers) and media constructions of her disappearance. Olivia Plender’s Newsroom (2008) occupies the show’s physical and conceptual heart, as its sole commission. Resembling a TV station circa 1970, the installation serves as the site for the exhibition’s forthcoming lectures, performances, and panel discussions. The message is clear: deconstructing the rhetoric of truth is not the task of this show—it is ours. —STAMATINA GREGORY

BENDING THE WIRE

UC BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM LIBRARY

Stories are as old as the world. A low-tech ur-entertainment wire, archaic pleasure buttons and, with that wavy, graspable pattern out of which a prime social agent used to shap perceptions and official histories, the ancient art of storytelling is not just for the old. Storytelling, with all its arcane potential to astonish and astound, is a way we are told the stories we tell. It is a way we are told the stories we tell. Yogic raving has all of storytelling’s potential to astound and astonish. It is a way we are told the stories we tell. Olivia Pier installation on the Spiritualists’ somewhat flat, wavering branches of ethnography and earnest fascination in the way of Martha Colburn’s intense animated animation film Myth Latex, which dissolves narrative flow in a torrent of crazed pilgrims and jubilant with track marks. Patricia Esquiendaringly gawky and tongue-in-cheek Folkslore II (2008) explains the kinship between the Habsburg monarch Philip II and a mole by means of a laptop PowerPoint film of a slightly off-kilter, and floppy images of the subjects in question. Michell’s hahn/huhn (2004–08) alludes to the piece, an installation of slides with the sediments of a forceful, live performance in which the artist highly associative narrative [pivot near-homophonic German last name “rooster,” and Huhn, “chicken”], a staccato urgency of an announce. The piece is only aided by an egg timer. Like a designer home electronics to extra sound, the artists here rely on loose-limbed natural narrative to fact with fiction and injecting recite with personal narrative. —YASMIN