

The New Criterion

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Gallery chronicle

by *James Panero*

On "Andrew Forge" at Betty Cuningham Gallery; "Nineteenth-century German Romantic Drawings" at David Nolan Gallery & "Paintings: Ralph Albert Blakelock, Louis Michel Eilshemius, and Albert Pinkham Ryder" at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries.

Walking into my favorite gallery can be like stepping into grandma's kitchen when the oven's on. Something's cooking, I don't know what it is, but chances are I'm going to like it. In New York, I depend on a dozen or so galleries for such comfort food. These are the galleries that know what I want before I want it.

The geographies vary—from Chelsea, to SoHo, to the Upper East Side—but the consistency of vision and the strength of personality keep these galleries on the tip of my tongue and in the front of my mind. From the rank novice to the seasoned expert, the secret of the gallery scene is to find places you like and to stick with them. What follows are three of my personal favorites.

Betty Cuningham Gallery can be reason alone to visit Chelsea. Anyone who claims that this neighborhood of former warehouses and autobody shops is merely now for the trendy and the market-driven must never have stepped into this gallery space. Cuningham's artists are always intelligent, introspective, and supremely accomplished. The experience of walking up from a windy, inhospitable Chelsea street into the sublime air of this light-filled gallery is like entering a work by Erik Satie. Cuningham built and opened this space in 2004. It's hard to believe there was ever a gallery scene without it.

Cuningham herself has been around for decades—working everywhere from Hirschl & Adler Galleries to Robert Miller. Over the years, she built up a loyal stable of artists, and they followed her here. Many of these artists will be familiar names to readers of this magazine: William Bailey, Jake Berthot, Rackstraw Downes, Philip Pearlstein, and Joan Snyder. Cuningham also represents two estates: Christopher Wilmarth and Andrew Forge.

What unites these artists? Cuningham says she goes for the hedgehog over the fox. Her artists look inward. They don't shout. In fact, they tend to be unusually well spoken. A number of them have set themselves apart as writers and

teachers. And there we might find another reason for her attraction. Cunningham likes to converse. In conversation with artists, one detects her deepest affection.

Over the last year, as I've learned, Cunningham commissioned short video interviews of several of her artists. Edited down to minutes, the clips tell a story in miniature. Will these videos go online? Will they ever be aired? No, Cunningham keeps these tapes in her office. You can ask to see them if you want, and you should if you have the chance, but I get the feeling that these videos are mainly for Cunningham herself. Now her artists are always around for a chat.

Andrew Forge was the model of a writer, teacher, and artist (writer on Monet, Degas, Giacometti, Bailey; teacher at Slade, Goldsmiths, Reading, Cooper Union, the New York Studio School, Yale, U. Penn, Dartmouth, and the University of South Carolina; painter of abstract work of dots and dashes that are tutorials in speechless wonder).

For the latest show, Cunningham has brought together Forge's oils and watercolors from the 1980s and 1990s.^[1] The exhibition leads off with watercolor on paper, which Forge described as his "release": the paintings happen very, very slowly, and at the end of the day sometimes it's very frustrating, because one's worked all day and there's not very much to be seen; so, from time to time I like to just let off energy and to try and set down structures that I can look at, that present me with a clear face.

By the way, that's another thing about Cunningham: beautiful, thoughtful catalogues. The Forge catalogue, which was designed by Grenfell Press and printed in Verona, Italy, features Jacopo Benci and Silvia Stucky in conversation with Forge (quoted above) from 1985. Cunningham then added her own touch. She boldfaced certain words of the interview: "My own painting ... truth in visual art ... America ... Rauschenberg ... for an artist who's developing ... it was a white canvas ... Monet ... audience that is internalized." As she explained it to me, if people don't read the whole interview, at least they notice this.

By arranging the smaller works on paper at the front of the gallery, and the paintings beyond, Cunningham gives us the visual equivalent of a bold-faced summary before encountering Forge's large oils on canvas. His work can resemble Pointillism. Or photographs blown out of scale. Or maybe those "magic eye" images that were the rage a decade or so ago; you remember, cross your eyes and see the image of a fish on a bicycle.

But no matter how much you look and move around them, Forge's paintings do not have anything approaching an obvious answer. With titles like *Large Meadow* (1997) and *September* (1995–1996), the eyes are seeing something, alright, and they don't care to share it. Look at the yellows peeking around the edge of *Heavy Hemlock I* (1999), a

work that gives off one of the strongest senses of color I've ever encountered, and there is little surprise that the eyes have it. Is it any wonder they always look forward to Betty Cuninghams next show?

Where art is concerned, David Nolan is like the last man standing in SoHo. That's just fine with me. The crowds that flock to the SoHo retail shops now migrate up to Chelsea for their art, which leaves me more time for one of the art world's best personalities, let alone best dealers of expressionist drawings and paintings. I might describe Nolan as a serious dealer, if he weren't having so much fun with his dealings. An Irish-accented gadfly, Nolan is the kind of gallery man who might offer a shot of whisky to the weary soul rounding an art fair's mile twenty-four—not that I would know. Representing artists like Carol Dunham, Jim Nutt, Peter Saul, and Joe Zucker, Nolan showcases art that may not be to everyone's taste. Given the quality of the work on display, however, it's art you're pleased to see even when you don't like it.

Nolan has built a specialty in contemporary German art, which has for years taken him throughout that country on buying trips. Uninterested at times with the contemporary work on offer, he developed a personal interest in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German drawings. This is the occasion for Nolan's latest exhibition of work from "the age of Goethe."^[2] Aside from Caspar David Friedrich and maybe Adolph Menzel, none of the artists here are household names. That's just the point. By exhibiting such drawings in a contemporary gallery, Nolan is bringing these artists to the attention of a new public. That fact isn't lost on the dealers from Hamburg to Munich who bring Nolan their work. These drawings are available at prices from \$3,000 to \$20,000, and are mainly uncirculated outside of a specialty market. With the eye of a contemporary dealer, Nolan may be slowly changing that. *View of the Sabine Hills with Tivoli in the Far Background* by Friedrich Salathé, from the early nineteenth century, is a verdant image of pen and ink and pencil that was deliberately left unfinished. It borders on the abstract, and would look right at home on the walls of The Armory Show. Change the date from 1807 to 2007, and no one would know the difference, save for the price tag. In the great price inversion known as the contemporary art market, if this work were new today, it would sell for ten times its amount. David Nolan knows how to find the humor in even the strangest situations.

Few art galleries make it into the international press, but such has been the case for Salander-O'Reilly. Recently this gallery made headlines around the world for offering a late religious Rembrandt, *Saint James the Greater* (1661), for sale at the Maastricht art fair. The price tag: \$50 million. Salander had been approached by the Shippy Foundation, which was given the work a year before by heirs to the Singer Co. sewing-machine fortune, to sell the painting to raise money for their charitable trust. If the work had sold, Salander would have rung in a Rembrandt for a record price. As it happened, the work was offered on the condition that it be sold only to a museum, and the work failed to move.

(The Rembrandt will hit the block at Sotheby's in late January, after this issue goes to press).

Established in 1976, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries proves that high rollers can also be the good guys. While his doppelgänger Larry Gagosian surfs down the pocket of the art wave, Larry Salander dives in at the bottom and floats up. He takes under-valued work and builds a market. He educates the public on quality across the board. He exhibits the figurative artists of the New York School, nineteenth-century landscape painters, contemporary painters and sculptors, and even oriental carpets. He organizes museum-quality shows, such as his magnificent “Constable’s Skies” exhibition of 2004 (where nothing was for sale).

Over the holidays, Salander did it again with an exhibition of three American originals: Ralph Albert Blakelock, Louis Michel Eilshemius, and Albert Pinkham Ryder.^[3] The man behind the show, like much at Salander, was Steven Harvey, who organized the Eilshemius exhibition at the National Academy of Design in 2001. Of these early modernists, Ryder remains the brooding legend, Eilshemius the wild experimenter, and Blakelock the rough-hewn bridge from the Hudson River School to the American avant-garde. All were something of a head-case. All used unorthodox materials. It was a gem of a show.

A little over a year ago, Salander doubled down on Renaissance and Baroque sculpture. Judging from a recent report in the *Los Angeles Times*, it looks like the investment is paying off. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently purchased from Salander *Saint John Capistran*, a 450-year-old work in glazed terra cotta by the Italian artist Santi Buglioni, after a curator happened upon the sculpture in the gallery.

And what a gallery! To house his new collection, adjacent to the Frick Art Reference Library, Salander purchased a neo-Italian Renaissance mansion built in 1922 for the wool merchant Julius Forstmann by Charles P. H. Gilbert (1861–1952). For the house tour alone this gallery is worth a look. Starting February 7, the gallery will exhibit new watercolors by Graham Nickson. It should be another great show, and another great reason to visit Salander.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. “Andrew Forge” opened at Betty Cuninghame Gallery, New York, on January 18 and remains on view through February 17, 2007. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. “Nineteenth-century German Romantic Drawings” opened at David Nolan Gallery, New York, on January 18 and remains on view through February 17, 2007. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. “Paintings: Ralph Albert Blakelock, Louis Michel Eilshemius, and Albert Pinkham Ryder” was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, from December 5, 2006 through January 6, 2007. [Go back to the text.](#)

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