



Loren Munk

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Reconnoitring: Cartography of an Art Enthusiast

February 10 - March 10, 2015

Essay by Raphael Rubinstein

Curated by Matthew Neil Gehring

Flecker Gallery

Suffolk County Community College

Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

On the cover:

"The Ferus Gallery...", (2009-10) oil on linen, 42 x 36 inches, detail.

Director's Foreword:

I say to my students often that an important part of becoming an artist is determining what part of the family tree you are on. Who do you have a shared dialogue with? I imagine this family tree from above; it starts in the center and radiates outward in an ever expanding circle. It grows outward over time and like a tree grows more slowly as the size increases, but the liminal space - the space in between its branches - continue to fill. The avant garde is located at the outer edge of this family tree, the newest of new growth, the edge between the space within the tree and the vast, infinite, unknown universe. It is the marker between all that's been done and all that's yet to be. This outer edge moves rapidly when the tree is young because growth is rapid and dramatic. As the tree matures and eventually towers above and spreads abreast, the change is much less perceptible, nearly seeming to halt. The noticeable change in a mature tree - or culture - is the change of season; that is to say a change of fashion. The problem then lies in the question of whether an avant garde condition can even exist in a mature culture and if so, where and how? In the mature state, it seems the only structurally possible avant garde scenarios are to sieze and fill the void left by a dead and rotted branch, or to start pruning.

Loren Munk is an artist who instinctively knows this, probes the problem and its history, is fascinated by and steeped in the charting of it. He is the Arborist, studying the tree, examining and in fact mapping the tree – counting its rings, wondering how it feeds itself. In a recent exchange with New York painter Gary Stephan, he said to me “Your next show with Loren should be a big hit, his maps / charts follow on so enthusiastically from Reinhardt.” Indeed they do, especially if you consider Ad Reinhardt to mark an apex of growth, the end of painting, as it were. The truth of his notion that painting must come to an end, but begin again, ad infinitum would seem to be an ethos embraced and plumbed by Munk.

This is a show of paintings made for art enthusiasts by an art enthusiast. Loren Munk is the most serious and committed student of art's recalled, remembered, and recorded past as well as its infinite present. Flecker Gallery is delighted to host this show.

Matthew Neil Gehring, Director

Loren Munk's Revisionist Cartography

by Raphael Rubinstein

“Geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history ‘happens,’ but an active force.”
- Franco Moretti

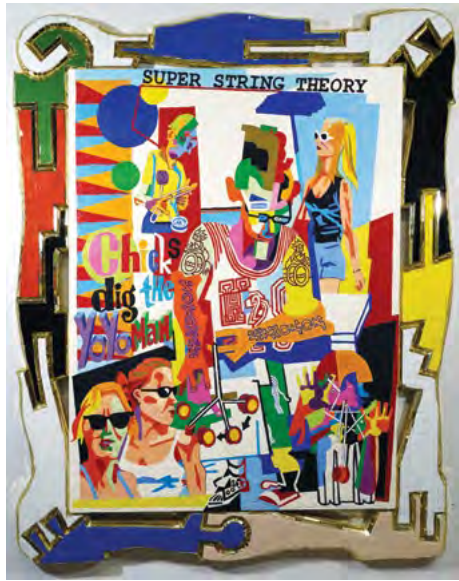
What is painting for? At the present moment there are many answers to this somewhat perennial question: self-expression, formal invention, social commentary, trancelike meditation, philosophical investigation, material experimentation, resisting digital media, assimilating digital media, rethinking art history, fueling an already over-heated art market. The paintings of Loren Munk partake of many of these options (though not - or at least not yet - the last one). At the same time his works, unabashedly diagrammatic and densely informational, depart dramatically from most contemporary painting practice, compelling viewers to find new ways of looking, and critics to find new modes of interpretation.

In large canvases such as *East Village Map* (2011-13) and *Super Map* (2007-2014), Munk presents us with a degree of factual matter that is, very likely, unprecedented in the realm of painting. Before he puts brush to canvas, the artist has assembled immense amounts of information, some of it from paging through old art magazines and monographs, some of it by talking to art-world veterans, some of it from his own memories. By these means, over the last 15 years or so Munk has built a database, still expanding, detailing the who, when, and where of vanished or vanishing artworlds. This, as much as paint and canvas, is the raw material from which he makes his paintings, which take the form of heavily annotated maps in which street plans are crisscrossed by countless multicolored lines that connect to text bubbles; he also often includes timelines near the edges of the paintings to give a chronological narrative to his geographical views; occasionally, as in a painting devoted to critic Clement Greenberg, there will be figurative imagery.

Munk didn't come to this distinctive format quickly. Through the 1990s, he was making paintings that featured fragmented motifs, often figurative. Influenced by Stuart Davis and Fernand Léger, as well as by the historicist figurative turn of Neo-Expressionism, these paintings also featured heavy mosaic-like frames that the artist constructed from wood, Foamcore and multi-colored mirror tile. Around 1997, in part to get himself out of the studio and to meet more people, Munk began to write art criticism, publishing



Stuart Davis, “Owh! in San Paō,” (1951), oil on canvas, 52 1/4 × 41 3/4 inches Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Loren Munk, "Chicks Dig The Yo-yo Man", (2002) oil on linen, glass on wood, 60 x 48 inches.

first NY Arts Magazine and, after 2000, in The Brooklyn Rail. His entry into criticism was accompanied by a campaign of research and study; a self-described college dropout, Munk felt he needed to deepen his knowledge of art history and esthetics if he was going to make a serious contribution to art discourse. (In 2006, Munk's extra-studio activities expanded as he started to shoot videos of exhibitions, openings and other art-related events and post them on YouTube under the name James Kalm; if the paintings look back in time, the videos are situated firmly in the present.)

It gradually dawned on the artist, who in the late 1990s was experiencing a kind of creative crisis, that the information he was gathering through his writing and research could furnish material for paintings. He had made some map paintings in the early 1980s but was urged by his then dealer to abandon them because, said the dealer, after Jasper Johns no one could make maps. Now Munk was ready to try again. As he began to conceive of using cartographic structures to address art history, he drew on his own experience. One of his jobs during his first years in New York was

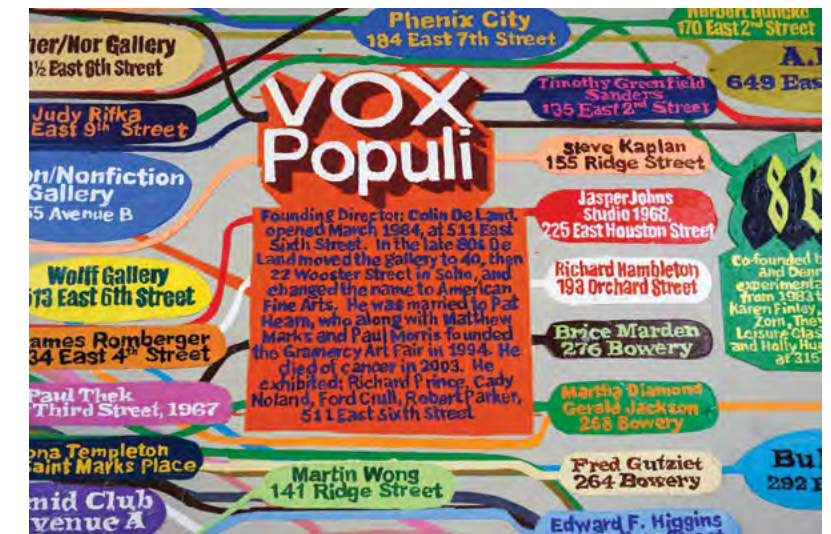
delivering art supplies for Utrecht Linens. In the early 1980s he would drive a truck all over downtown Manhattan dropping off materials for the hot artists of the moment, including Jean Michel Basquiat, Julian Schnabel and Sandro Chia. With the same methodical attention to details that he would later bring to his painting practice, Munk kept a log of his deliveries in a pocket book, noting down the address of each artist-customer. From the beginning, then, Munk's mental map of New York was highlighted with artists' studios and his knowledge of the artworld was, in part, geographical knowledge.

This personal history is especially important in *East Village Map*, a painting where a purple and yellow map of a section of downtown Manhattan is surrounded by more than 200 text bubbles, each noting the location of a gallery, an artist's studio or some other significant art site. Although most of the texts give only the most basic facts—name and address, sometimes a year—there are certain galleries and people to whom Munk devotes more space. For instance, on the right side of the painting underneath the name of the gallery Vox Populi, Munk appends what is for him a lengthy entry on the life of its proprietor: "Founding Director: Colin De Land, opened March 1984, at 511 East Sixth Street. In the late 80s De Land moved the gallery to 40, then 22 Wooster Street in Soho, and changed the name to American Fine Arts. He was married to Pat Hearn, who along with Matthew Marks and Paul Morris founded the Gramercy Art Fair in 1994. He died of cancer in 2003. He exhibited: Richard Prince, Cady Noland, Ford Crull, Robert Parker, 511 East Sixth Street."

There is, of course, much more that could be added to De Land's biography, just as one could add more information to the thousands of names that appear in Munk's paintings. (It is typical of Munk's respect for marginalized artists that he names Crull and Parker alongside the far more famous Prince and Noland.) In one way, his paintings are invitations to viewers to conduct their own research. In *East Village Map* Munk makes clear the incomplete nature of his project thanks to a subtitle near the bottom edge of the painting that reads, "an attempted documentation concentration on the years 1979-1989." This isn't the first time Munk has focused on the East Village. In *Village of the Damned* (2004-2006), he depicted, at a smaller scale and with far fewer details, what that painting's subtitle describes as "the rise and fall of an art scene." This is an artist who isn't afraid to revise his own work. It's also important to note that many of the paintings pack a polemical bite, such as *Brooklyn Makes Manhattan Takes*, a 2005-2006 painting where the map itself has nearly vanished under a blanket of closely packed text bubbles.

I'd like to think that future art historians will make use of these paintings, not only as visual guides to the geography of specific moments, but also as pointers toward further investigation. The history of Colin De Land is well known, but what about two artists whose names appear near the Vox Populi as living and working at 268 Bowery: Martha Diamond, an estimable painter who showed extensively in the 1980s, and Gerald Jackson, an innovative African-American artist whose work was acquired by MOMA in the 1970s? The Diamond/Jackson label points to one of the most fascinating aspects of Munk's research: discovering which artists lived in the same building; the Bowery is especially rich in such conjunctions.

It occurs to me that for nearly every artist who appears in his paintings, Munk could have substituted a different name, someone else either living at the same address or in a building nearby. The necessity of choosing is fundamentally at odds with the inclusive nature of Munk's entire project, but because there is limited space on the surface of his paintings (just as there is limited space in the actual cityscape), he must constantly make choices, decide whom to include and whom to leave out. I suspect that it is difficult for Munk to leave out anyone; he always seems to want to slip in one more artist, one more gallery, one more address. When he finally does



Loren Munk, "East Village Map (Vox Populi)", (2011-13) oil on linen, two panels, 84 x 144 inches (detail).

run out of room he no doubt sets aside the leftover names and references for a future painting. One of the messages of Munk's over-crowded compositions, along with reminding us of just how many artists, critics and galleries have populated New York City, is that there should be room for everyone in art history.

His drive toward maximum inclusivity, for accommodating as much information as possible, contributes to the distinctive style of the paintings. Significantly, his aesthetic choices, his formal decisions, are driven by the content and its quantity rather than by personal taste and subjectivity. As the artist explained in a 2011 interview with Hrag Vartanian, "I try to design the paintings so they essentially paint themselves once I get the data, and usually they're finished when they're full." Even his choice of colors is determined by the sheer quantity: "Without the strong and 'jarring' juxtaposing, the hundreds of bubbles and lines of color would be less distinct. It's also a way of using a less aesthetically based means of choosing colors, and surprisingly, there are some relationships that happen that, because of taste or habit, I would never have picked intentionally." Here it might be worth noting that although Munk uses a computer to compose his paintings—including the panoply of attention-grabbing fonts that are such an important aspect of his work—the paintings themselves are defiantly handmade, and not without the occasional misspelling or typo. To me, the fact that they are imperfect and can't easily be corrected is part of their beauty. Munk may rely at times on crowd-sourcing when he is assembling his data, but the final art-object is clearly the work of an individual, the creation of a single artist working hard in his studio.

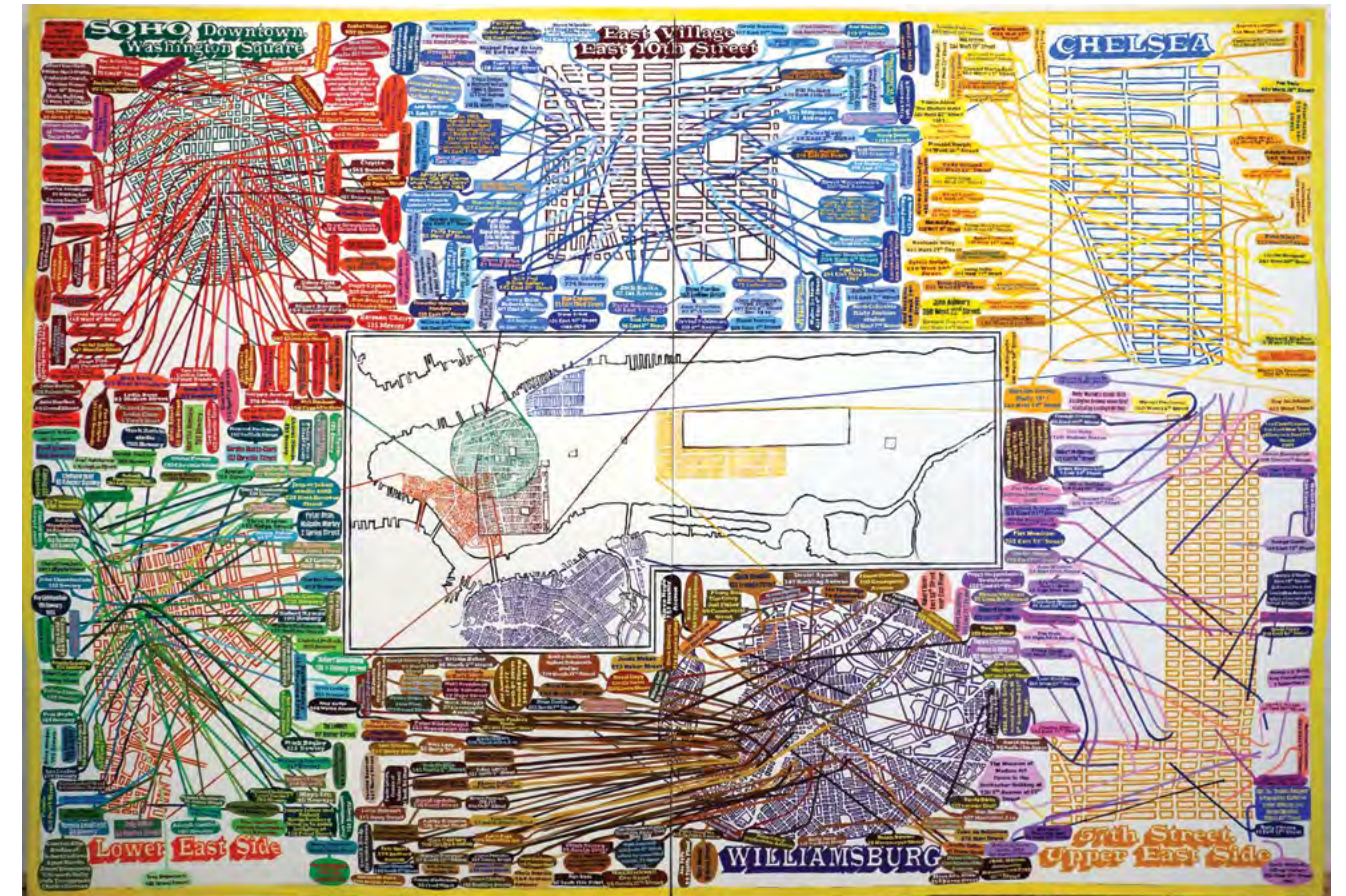
Although the artist insists that data drives his paintings, there is an excess, a visual delirium, within Munk's work that radically distances it from the realm of helpful diagrams and pedagogical charts. Sometimes his lines are painted so closely together that it becomes almost impossible to follow them from text to location; they look like circuits in an overloaded telephone exchange or like the cables for some cutting-edge high-tech prototype. If Mondrian's version of New York City imitated the syncopated clarity of big-band jazz, Munk's is more akin to one of Glenn Branca's symphonies for 100 electric guitars.

Of course, Munk is hardly the first person to use diagrams to communicate ideas about art history. Precedents include Marinetti's "Sintesi Futurista della Guerra," Alfred H. Barr's famous flow chart of Cubism and Abstract Art and Ad Reinhardt's diagrammatic collage "A Portend of the Artist as a Yhung Mandala." Closer in space and time to Munk are Mark Lombardi's drawings tracking global networks of political power. But the artist with whom Munk has the most affinities is Alfred Jensen. What links Jensen and Munk is not just their passion for the diagrammatic but also their rejection of easy esthetic solutions. Their paintings confront viewers with an overload of information and feature strident, unconventional color combinations and no-nonsense paint handling that stresses blunt materiality. Perhaps most importantly, Munk and Jensen are both painters whose work must be accepted on its own terms: you can't simply bracket out the content or pretend to ignore the intricate systems and the world views it implies. They paint with an inescapable sense of mission.

As his work developed Munk began to articulate a theoretical position, one that was built on the materialist nature of his artistic practice. In an unpublished manifesto he wrote for his 2006 exhibition "Greater Williamsburg: We Are Our Own Art History," he expressed his belief "that art may be governed by forces that can be analyzed and calculated, indeed that there is an extra-aesthetic nature to art that lies more within the realm of rational science than in the ephemeral mystical world of 'taste,' or 'quality.'" For Munk, what he calls "the physics of aesthetics" is a holistic view of art that takes into account all manner of social and economic factors.

There are interesting parallels between Munk's project and the work of the French historians associated with the journal *Annales*. Like Fernand Braudel or Lucien Febvre, Munk doesn't wish to reduce the past into a narrative of great events but, instead, taking geography as an organizing principle, he wants to build up a fuller sense of history by registering the lives of those who may have been left out of official chronicles but whose presence nonetheless contributed to the culture of their moment. Munk's approach also has affinities with the methods of the innovative literary scholar Franco Moretti, who has found new ways of understanding the history of the novel through the use of maps and statistics. By mapping the locations of characters in novels by Jane Austen or Balzac, Moretti has discovered hitherto unnoticed patterns that have much to tell us about society of the time and about how novels work. Another side of Moretti's research has to do with tracking the distribution of books, with equally interesting results. Moretti studies, as he puts it, "space in literature" and "literature in space." Something similar might be said about Munk, who is concerned with "space in art" (structuring his paintings around cartography) and with "art/artists in space" (tracking down the locations where art has been made and exhibited). It is, I think, a mark of his achievement that even for viewers who know well the streets he charts, and maybe even remember some of the long-shuttered galleries he memorializes, the experience of looking at one of Loren Munk's painting is like a venture into unknown territory: you feel lost in a city, a life, full of infinite possibilities. That's also something that painting can do, sometimes.

Raphael Rubinstein is a New York-based poet and art critic whose numerous books include *Polychrome Profusion: Selected Art Criticism 1990-2002* (Hard Press Editions) and *The Afterglow of Minor Pop Masterpieces* (Make Now). He edited the anthology *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* (Hard Press Editions). His book of micro-narratives *In Search of the Miraculous: 50 Episodes from the Annals of Contemporary Art* has been translated into French (Editions Greges). From 1997 to 2007 he was a senior editor at *Art in America*, where he continues to be a contributing editor. He is currently professor of critical studies at the University of Houston. In 2002, the French government presented him with the award of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters. In 2010, his blog *The Silo* won a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant.



"Super Map", (2007-2014) oil on linen, two panels, 96 x 144 inches, detail above.



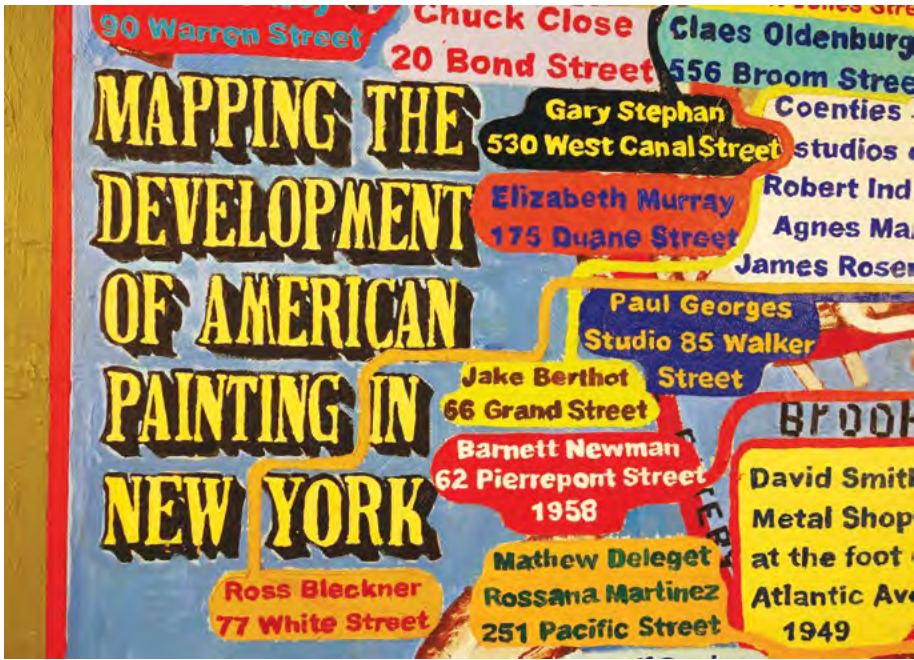
“Some California Artists...”, (2011-13) oil on linen, 72 x 84 inches.



"East Village Map", (2011-13) oil on linen, two panels, 84 x 144 inches, detail above.

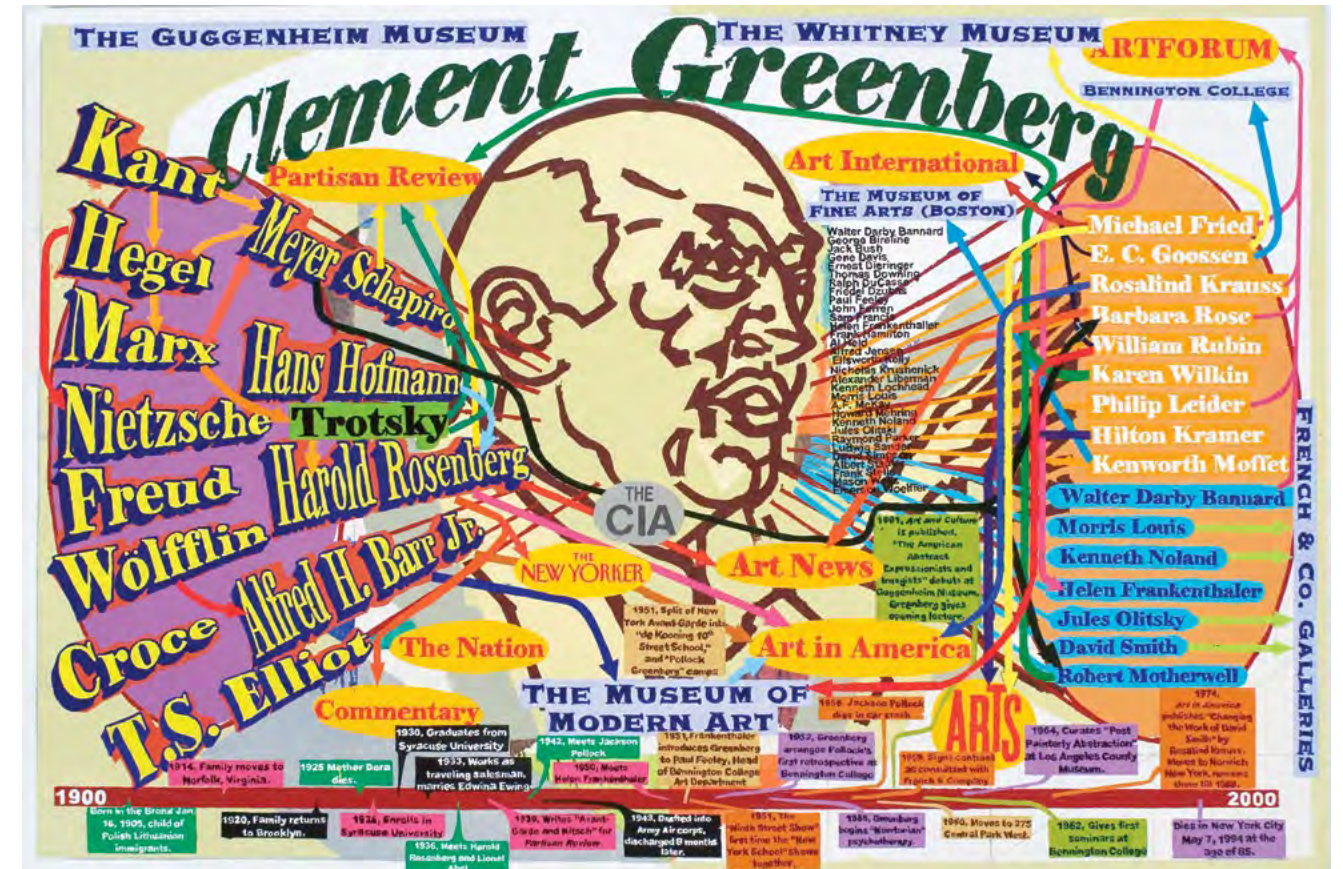


"Village of the Damned", (2004-06) oil on linen, 60 x 72 inches.



"What Manhattan Makes, Brooklyn Takes", (2004-06) oil on linen, 72 x 64 inches, detail above.

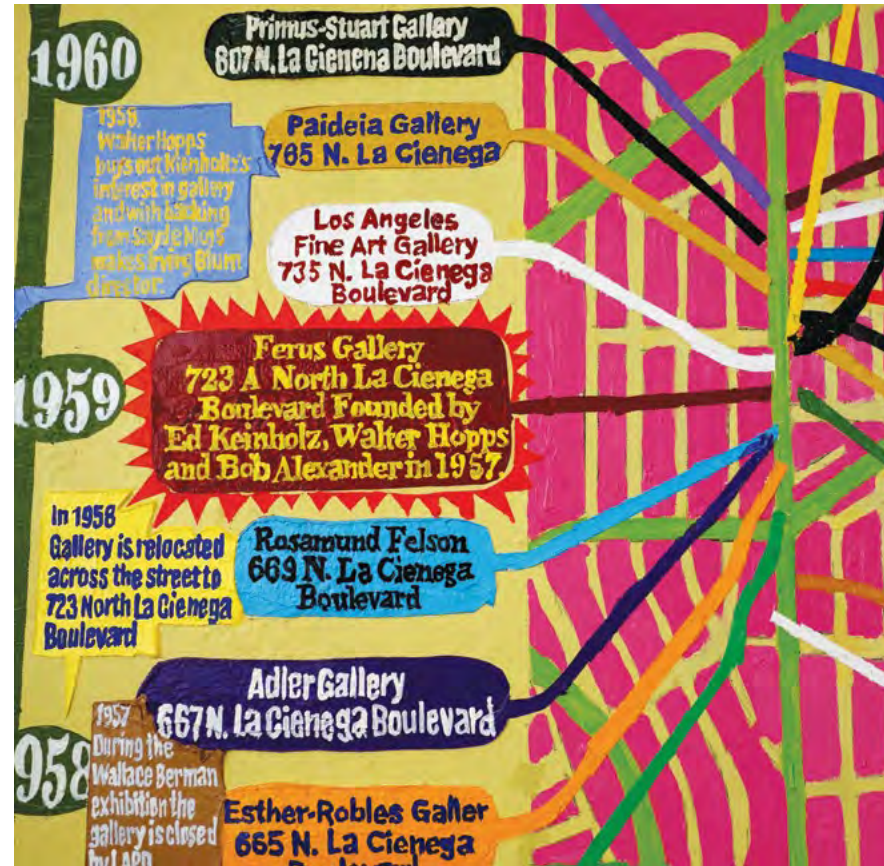




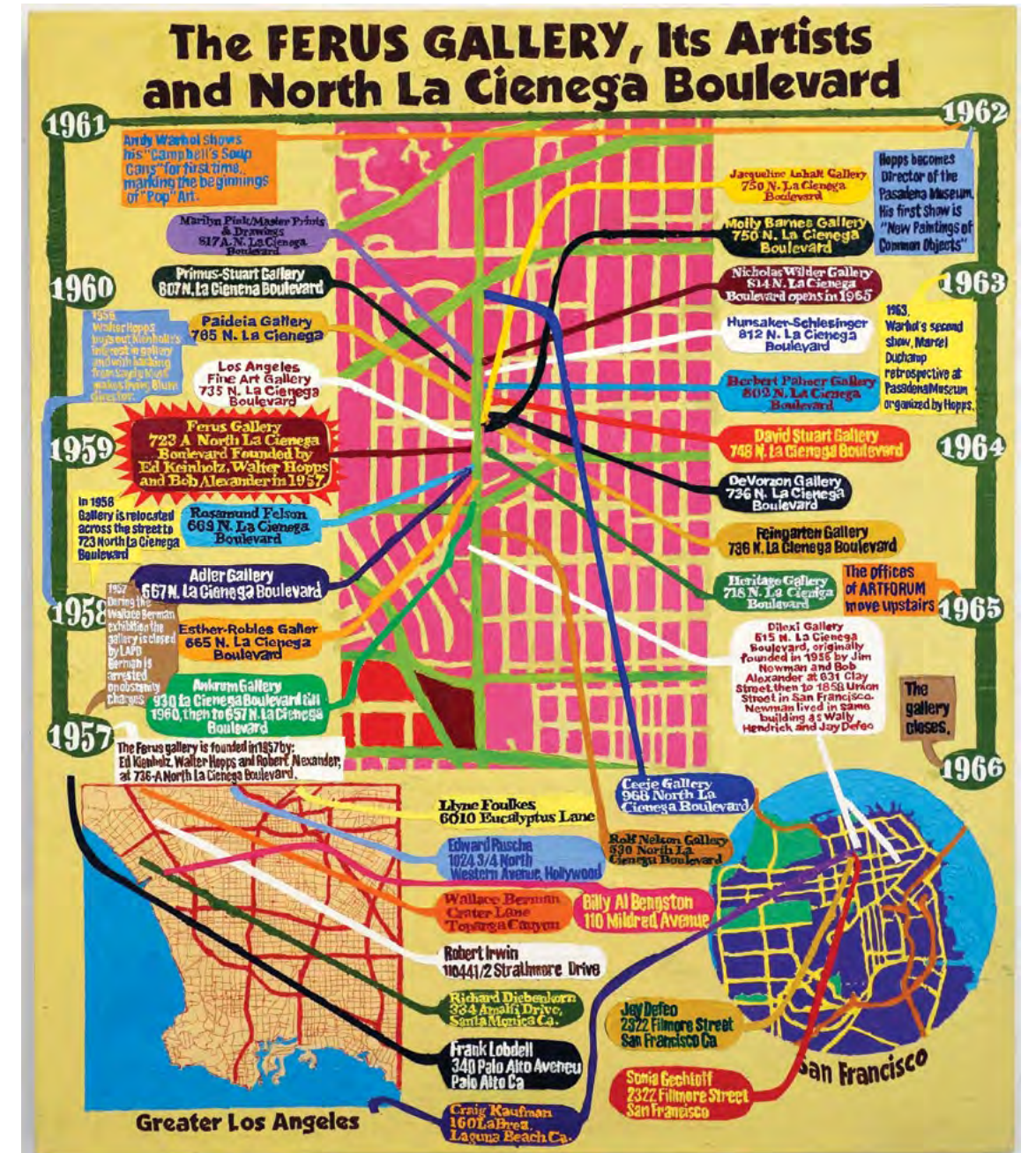
"Clement Greenberg (Large)", (2005-06) oil on linen, 48 x 72 inches.



"The Bowery and the New Lower East Side", (2008-10) oil on linen, 60 x 36 inches.



"The Ferus Gallery...", (2009-10) oil on linen, 42 x 36 inches.





"Ascension", (2005-08) oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches.



The artist in his Red Hook studio.

Loren Munk Bio:

The artist Loren Munk is a painter, videographer and art writer. He is known within the New York artist's community primarily for his extensive work documenting the art scene through his map and diagram paintings, video reports and reviews.

After studies at Idaho State University, and spending two and a half years in Europe in the United States Army, Munk returned stateside to attend New York's Art Students' League on the GI Bill. Munk's work debuted in SoHo in 1981 with a double show at J. Fields and Gabrielle Bryers galleries. In addition to exhibiting in Brazil, France, Germany and the United States, Munk has executed numerous national and international public and private commissions, including a mural for the Mayor's Office of Paris. He is well represented in important collections throughout Europe, South and North America and the Middle East.

Most recently, Munk has been producing a major series of paintings that tackle the subject of art itself through an historical and diagrammatic lens. In addition to publishing reviews and essays, he has expanded his role in the artistic community by curating and promoting exhibitions, and offering his acknowledged expertise on the Williamsburg and Bushwick arts scenes.

Munk has lectured and critiqued at New York's School of Visual Arts, Harvard University, Rutgers University, The Studio School, The New York Academy of Art, The Sotheby's Institute of Art, Long Island University C.W. Post and Lehman College.

Inventing the spontaneous online review, Munk documents the New York art world in YouTube videos, using the name James Kalm. The Kalm Report and Rough Cut Channel have a worldwide following with over four million views. Shot from a first person perspective using a hand held camera and basic editing techniques, Kalm has produced over one thousand on-line videos.

Kalm arrives at an art show by bike - he calls himself "the guy on the bike" - and then walks through the show while providing commentary and interviews. A feature article on Munk's video project by Jed Lipinski appeared in The New York Times. Bant Magazine featured him on the cover of their May 2014 Issue and an interview by James Panero of The New Criterion appeared in the Fall 2014 issue of BAKU.

Loren's most recent painting exhibition was held at Freight+Volume Gallery in Chelsea February through March, 2014. In 2011 his show at Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side received overwhelming critical response including reviews by Roberta Smith in The New York Times and others. In the August 12, 2013 New York Magazine while reviewing the group show "The Decline and Fall of the Art World: Part One" at Freight+Volume, Jerry Saltz featured an interactive reproduction of his painting "East Village Map." His work is represented on the West Coast by the Daniel Weinberg Gallery Los Angeles. His long running column "Brooklyn Dispatches" appears in the Brooklyn Rail on a semi regular basis and is the longest running, most in-depth and consistent coverage of the Brooklyn art scene available. Munk's work can be viewed at www.lorenmunk.com.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/jameskalm?feature=mhee>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/25/nyregion/via-youtube-painter-loren-munk-gives-world-a-tour-of-the-ny-art-scene.html>

<http://www.bantmag.com/english/issue/post/30/79>

<http://www.supremefiction.com/theidea/2014/10/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/arts/design/loren-munk-location-location-locationmapping-the-new-york-art-world.html>

<http://www.vulture.com/2013/08/saltz-on-loren-munks-east-village-map-paintings.html>

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www.sunysuffolk.edu

www.fleckergallery.org

Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring

Essay by Raphael Rubinstein

Images courtesy of Freight and Volume Gallery

Photography of artworks: Loren Munk

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At right: Studio shot of work in progress in the artist's Red Hook studio.

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