The New York Times
nytimes.com

October 10, 1986

ART: AT THE WHITNEY, JOHN SINGER SARGENT

By JOHN RUSSELL

IN the matter of John Singer Sargent, whose paintings and watercolors can be seen through Jan. 4 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, it is important to keep a delicate balance. Sargent painted some wonderful things. The fact that he also painted terrible things does not invalidate the quality of his portraits of Carolus-Duran, Robert Louis Stevenson, Vernon Lee and Henry James. Nor can it change the fact that Sargent's "Interior in Venice" of 1899 is our memorable image of the privileged life as it was lived in Venice by turn-of-the-century Americans who could have stepped straight out of a novel by Edith Wharton.

As for "Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)" of 1884, it retains its fascination, no matter how often we have read of the scandal that it created in Paris by reason of its supposedly improper implications, thereby precipitating Sargent's fateful move to London. Just why this most diplomatic of men should have made so grave a professional mistake is a matter of enduring interest, and one that is probed in depth by the art historian Albert Boime in his contribution to the book-length catalogue that is published by the Whitney Museum and Harry N. Abrams and costs $25 in softback and $35 in hardback. Normally, we can see "Madame X" at the Met any day we like, but at the Whitney it gains enormously by being seen with key paintings by Sargent's Parisian period.

In the case of Mme. Gautreau, we may wonder if Sargent the painter did not for once get too close to womankind in its more dangerous aspects. (Sargent the man was much too wary, in that context.) But then the whole question of Sargent's Parisian milieu calls for an examination more impartial than we can expect of a catalogue that is purely celebratory in tone. It may well be that the young Sargent was an innocent abroad who never did a better day's work for himself than when he opted for a safe harbor in late Victorian London and stopped twittering about the charm of a sitter who was - so he said -"made up to the extent of being a uniform lavender or blotting-paper color all over."

Faced with an American type that was the exact opposite of Mme. Gautreau - that of the well-bred, well-raised East Coast young woman in whom a latent agitation is kept within bounds - Sargent could portray her with an insight and a sympathy that wins all our admiration. He could also, and throughout his long career, be jolted into an unwonted freedom from formula by a human subject that ran counter to his own nature or a landscape that was like nothing in the Europe that he had traversed so often in childhood.

The female nude, for instance, was something he avoided until his 36th year, tried once, and seems to have dropped forthwith. The resulting "Study From Life" was nothing to be ashamed of, but we do not find in it the gruff and deeply felt eloquence of his penciled studies of naked young men. When he went in 1905-06 to study the landscape of the Holy Land, he professed himself ill pleased with the results - "No miraculous draught," he wrote home, "but I shall still fish here for a while." But we can say for him, though he might demur, that in his "Plains of Esdraelon" he got the tawny and apparently limitless land exactly right.

The present show at the Whitney was organized jointly with the Art Institute of Chicago, where it will be seen from Feb. 7 through April 19. It has the merit of including every one of the paintings referred to above, together with many others that show us exactly why Sargent was so much loved in his lifetime, and why he is now enjoying a second apotheosis. There are in the show at least four times as many of his watercolors as this particular visitor ever wants to see again, but the pacing of his career in oils is exemplary. In particular, Sargent's ability to portray a complete section of society in terms that were entirely acceptable to it could hardly be better shown. Also of interest this week: Bridget Riley (Jeffrey Hoffeld Gallery, 1020 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street): It was during the summer of the student riots in 1968 that Bridget Riley won first prize at the Venice Biennale. The announcement of the award was delayed until every last possible upheavalist had left Venice, and for this reason it lost much of its usual effect. Riley remained typecast in the popular view as a protagonist and exemplar of Op Art, rather than as what she actually was - a student of psychological stresses and extreme states of mind who had found a way to portray them in ways that were as penetrating as they were delicate.

Initially, and in the black and white paintings that made her name, we had the sensation of being taken closer to the edge of emotional breakdown than was comfortable. If hell fire were made of ice, it would be rather like the impact of the Rileys of 20 or so years ago. We were brought back safe, as it happened, but it was what a great soldier once called "a damned close-run thing."

No one could have gone on painting pictures like that, and eventually the tensions relaxed - or became less evident - and Riley turned

to color, and to tall thin stripes, for the stories that she had to tell. To American eyes, the result sometimes looked like Gene Davis, although both Riley's use of sequence and the basic purpose of her chromatic fences are quite different from his.

It is relevant to her present show that one of the paintings in it, called "Viva," was prompted by the Renoir retrospective that came to London a year or two ago. Renoir's pinks, in particular, can be sensed in back of it. As this might suggest, Riley today goes easy on the anguish and allows for a sweetness and a soft radiance of color that would have been out of character at the time of her triumph in Venice. Where her early paintings were a late variant of European expressionism, her recent stripe paintings are about reconciliation, and about mutual adjustment, and (by implication) about the ways in which one human being can show off another to advantage.

In the final section of the show, Riley takes a completely new tack. For the first time in her work, diagonals play a part in it. Color-clusters form and re-form as they move upward and across, downward and through. Where formerly the design was a "given," tight and complete, it now offers possibilities of symphonic interplay. Formal odds and ends are made welcome in ways previously unthinkable, and we sense that an elaborate, densely motivated changing of places is in progress. These are paintings with a large potential. (Through Nov. 8.) Patrick Ireland (the Clocktower, 108 Leonard Street): If you think that conceptual art was pure cerebration and that minimal art was thin, cold and lacking in general appeal, Patrick Ireland's show at the Clocktower is a good place to straighten yourself out. His work is conceptual, in that it proceeds from principles that can be put into words, and it is minimal, in that everything superfluous or merely contingent has been discarded from it. But, when that has been said, these drawings, dated 1965-1985, are pure delight.

To be precise, they are light and exact in touch, fresh and lyrical in color, and fleet of foot in their execution. Never is there an element of pedantry, for all the learned and sometimes arcane substructure that Ireland has taken over from - to take one instance only - the linear, serial translation of the Roman alphabet that was made by Irish Celts around the fourth to fifth century A.D. To be both brainy and adorable is one of the neatest tricks around, and these drawings bring it off. The rope piece, or environment, called "House Calls," is a neat trick, too, and not least in its sidelong reference to the artist's early days on the edges of medical practice. (Through Oct. 19.) Sean Scully (David McKee Gallery, 41 East 57th Street): Sean Scully first came to notice in this country with stripe paintings that were tightly and densely conceived in terms of close color values. Such was their "extreme opticality" (as he himself calls it) that when he made a mural-sized painting in the corner of a friend's loft it looked to him (his words, again) "like a big bear in the corner."

Those pictures were built, as much as painted, and more recently Scully has opened out the building element and produced work that looks like a detail from the side of an old-style man-of-war that has been given lessons in camouflage. Some of the elements in the painting jut forward, that is to say, in two or three contrasting layers, and the paint is laid down or pulled in ways that have nothing to do with their structure. Not only that, but the paint actually goes against the structure, contradicts it and fools us into not seeing it straight. The balance of light and dark, rough and smooth, leads its own life, as do the big, blocky, chunky, deliberately awkward pieces of wood.

These are commanding constructions, slow to declare themselves but terribly tenacious. We know what Scully meant when he lately said to the art historian Joseph Masheck that the new works were "truer to the way things are, for me, than if I tried to make totally resolved, inevitable, abstract paintings." (Through Oct. 28.)

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