

## A Reckless Generosity Energizes the Art of David Tobey

David Tobey, a professional violinist as well as a painter and sculptor, finds excitement and inspiration in unexpected places. Films, for example, have always felt to him "like three-dimensional paintings, all happening across time." When he describes seeing Stanley Kubrick's "2001, A Space Odyssey" as a child with his father, the distinguished muralist and painter Alton Tobey, he makes it sound like a spiritual epiphany: "I was tremendously affected and have never been the same since. I felt and experienced freedom, excitement, my salvation, and even the scope of infinity from the movie."

Growing up in an artistic household in Westchester, where, when he sat in his father's studio, watching him work, he could often hear his mother, the concert pianist Rosalyn Tobey, rehearsing in another part of the house, fed into what he refers to as an "inner world of abstraction and sound. I let my thoughts go wherever they might. Rhythm, motion, color, light structure, dimension and raw emotion were characters in my private theater."

This sense of the creative act as inner necessity, of something which has literally always been second nature to him, is reflected in the title of Tobey's new exhibition "Driving Force," at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, from September 25 through October 13, with a reception Saturday, September 29 from 3 to 7 PM. (Thirty percent of the proceeds from sales of the paintings, welded steel sculptures, and giclee prints in the show will benefit the American Cancer Society; and on September 25th, "Reaching for the Cure," a painting that Tobey created especially for the same organization, will be auctioned off in a benefit event called "Evening of Jazz," at Le Chateau restaurant at Route 35, Junction 123, in South Salem, Westchester County.)

While it might be a stretch to claim unequivocally that Tobey's long experience as a member of the Westchester Philharmonic and numerous other symphony and Broadway show orchestras directly informs his visual work, his compositions have a fluidity which could be considered musical. He also seems less constrained by purely visual conventions than a lot of other painters, in that he moves rather uninhibitedly between abstract and figurative modes of expression, often combining them within a single canvas.

"Reaching for a Cure," the painting created especially for the benefit at Le Chateau restaurant illustrates this synthesis especially well, with its vigorously linear figures borne along in an abstract vortex of rolling blue forms overlaid by skeins of liquefied red and orange pigment that appear to have been flung onto the canvas in the manner of Jackson Pollock. Here, Tobey is at his most

daring, endeavoring, almost by sheer force of will, to merge the heroic manner of classical history painting with the energetic techniques of modern action painting and achieve an effect quirkily reminiscent of the eccentric British visionary William Blake.



"A River View, 2007"

The object toward which the figures in the composition appear to strive as strenuously as marathon swimmers is an emblematic orb, resembling a stylized sun, emitting tactile yellow rays and with a Phoenix-like bird at its center clutching a caduceus, the ancient symbol for healing, comprised of a sword entwined with serpents, used in the logo of the American Cancer Society. The painting conveys a sense of the spiritual struggle that the artist may be telling us must go hand-in-hand with the scientific aspects of healing. It is a subject that a less intrepid painter might hesitate to attempt, given its over-the-top imagery and the impossibility of leavening it with irony.

However, it is one of David Tobey's saving graces, in an artistic climate increasingly hobbled by self-protective careerist caution, to plunge right into the painterly fray, taking necessary risks. And for those who can't get out to the event in Westchester County, there are numerous other examples of his boldness to be seen in the exhibition at Pleiades Gallery. Among the more striking

recent ones are the 2007 acrylics on canvas "A River View," and "The Cat and the Fiddle," both of which embed representational subjects within brilliantly colorful, flatly painted forms enclosed by sinuous black outlines in compositions that appear, at first glance, to be completely abstract. In the former painting the image that finally emerges is an aerial view of a jaggedly flowing, pale blue river running through a mostly red landscape that combines neo-Fauvist chromatics with angular shapes reminiscent of Native American tribal motifs; in the latter, a fancifully delineated feline fiddler plays hide and seek among baroquely billowing areas of blue, yellow, aquamarine, orange, crimson and purple hues.

While a less ambitious painter could base an entire career on such paintings, Tobey is a restless experimenter, as seen in "David and Goliath," and "Dancing Totem," two other 2007 paintings featuring narrow vertical shapes with a cursive bent that could resemble totemic semi-abstract sculptures and also appear related to his late father, Alton Tobey's "Curvilinear" series. Indeed, "David and Goliath" could suggest the Oedipal struggle of the artist to break free from his illustrious father's towering shadow and lingering influence. There need be no worry on that score; for although his father was his first teacher, and, along with Picasso and Pollock, had an important formative influence on his work, David Tobey has achieved an aesthetic autonomy that is everywhere evident in this exhibition.

Included are stark figurative expressionist works such as "Premonitions of War" and "War," from 2004, in which puppet-like military figures and frightened mothers clutching their children wander amid a ruined, nightmare landscape, in compositions reminiscent of Goya and George Grosz. Another—again, more cautious—artist might think twice before juxtaposing such images with buoyant, playful abstractions like "The Chess Match" (2007) and other diverse works such as the meticulous canvas "Cosmecium" (2006), with its intricate and meticulous array of cursive calligraphic forms possessed of an almost Persian complexity. Another artist, for that matter, might think it prudent to segregate the paintings from the sculptures, thereby denying the viewer the pleasure of encountering a work such as the welded metal piece "Orchids," with its winning combination of ruggedness and grace.

David Tobey, however, is far too creatively fecund to play it safe by suppressing any aspect of his talent for the sake of the "foolish consistency" that Longfellow once referred to as "the hobgoblin of little minds."

He is a recklessly large talent, and his refusal to discriminate should be looked upon as an act of generosity. —Ed McCormack