



## Alan Artner | In the Galleries

# Roche's works grow larger in size if not in scope

Puerto Rico native's links to the expressionism of Van Gogh more evident

**Arnaldo Roche** showed paintings at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center in the heyday of Neo Expressionism more than 20 years ago. Now he is back at the Chicago Cultural Center with recent works larger and more open about their links to the expressionism of Vincent van Gogh than ever, and it is a happy return for the native of Puerto Rico who once made his home here.

The works take in Van Gogh, the childhood death of Roche's brother, 9/11 and the 2004 Asian tsunami. Not all of the influences are equally clear. However, quotations from Van Gogh paintings and drawings are fully assimilated into Roche's overpowering style, which is based in the technique of frottage or rubbing.

Always large, the paintings are now truly monumental, and some on view have the technique but not the pictorial incident to sustain interest at that size. Still, as it was in the '80s, this has remained distinctive, personal work that succeeds in stimulating viewers without recourse to either popular culture or a "conceptual" program.

*At 78 E. Washington St. 312-744-6630.*

Last month the International Sculpture Center in San Francisco gave **Fletcher Benton** a lifetime achievement award, and now, in Chicago, the 77-year-old master of outdoor work receives a strong small show of maquettes, prints, tabletop and wall pieces at the Jean Albano Gallery.

Some of the pieces are homages to Wassily Kandinsky and particularly his later, hard-edged geometric abstractions. This suggests the tradition with which Benton identifies, but it is not the full story. Benton's major contributions have been free-standing pieces with the economy of folded-paper cut-outs and a series of works that defy gravity even as it celebrates inher-



Arnaldo Roche's *The Garden of Intolerance: In the End, Like Fathers, Like Madmen or Like Heroes* (triptych).

### EXHIBITIONS

**Arnaldo Roche** at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center through June 22

**Fletcher Benton** at Jean Albano Gallery through July 5

**Brian Ulrich and Jason Lazarus** at the City Gallery at the Historic Water Tower through Aug. 3

**Christina Body** at the Palette & Chisel Academy of Fine Arts through May 26

ent qualities of steel and bronze. Both are represented here.

Less well-known are the wall pieces called "Steel Paintings" in which some of Benton's three-dimensional components are brought together, again sometimes precariously, with incised geometric painted forms. These, too, are persuasive, though much more sober than the selections from "The Steel Watercolor Series," a series of multiples that substantially lightens through balance alone a persisting modern current.

*At 215 W. Superior St. 312-440-0770.*

**Brian Ulrich's** show of a series of photographs on thrift stores in December 2006, suggested that his continuing protest of American consumerism perhaps needed to go upscale, into the auction houses and galleries dedicated to our culture of money. Now, Ulrich and **Jason Lazarus** exhibit works in the City Gallery at the Historic Water Tower that were in fact taken at the Wright auction house in Chicago, but they serve neither the art pictured nor the cause of making anyone more aware of the empty cycle of acquisition.

When, say, Walker Evans and Charles Sheeler were commissioned to shoot art objects, the works received such superfine treatment that the photo images could stand in for a first-hand viewing experience. Here, however, the Wright commission, which was said to give the photographers full access to the facilities, has been fulfilled by Lazarus undercutting the art when he pictures it at all and Ulrich drawing away from the social commentary that is his motivation and forte.

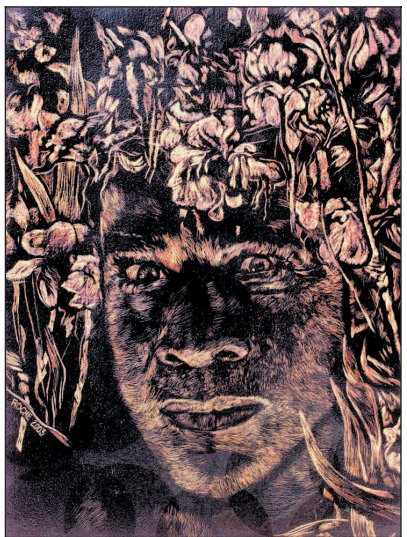
Lazarus addresses only indirectly works by Ad Reinhardt, Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Jenny Holzer,

Donald Judd and Jasper Johns. The single piece shot head on is Philippe Halsman's photograph of Marilyn Monroe as Mao Tse Tung—and its treatment is too stupid for words. Ulrich begins more promisingly in Wright's backroom and studio—an image of pairs of sconces and chairs is chilling—but is diverted into coy portraits inspired by paintings and extreme closeups of upholstery.

*At 806 N. Michigan Ave. 312-742-0808.*

At the height of the modern movement, it often was said that subject matter in painting counted for little. Of course, no one asked viewers, who always are attracted to some subjects and not others, depending on personal makeup. But in those years such was the pressure to "go beyond" subject matter that even fairly sophisticated viewers would pretend not to notice, as when a gay collector in Chicago feigned surprise to an interviewer who remarked that the only nudes he owned were of males.

Nowadays, things are different. More than 20 years of emphasis on sexual, racial and political themes



Roche's works, including *I Saw the Stars Falling, Under Vincent's Flowers* (triptych), is on display at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center through June 22.

have reopened the way for less charged content as well, and representational artists again are known as much for their subject matter as how they set it down. An example is **Christina Body's** large exhibition of paintings at the Palette & Chisel Academy of Fine Arts, which includes landscapes and marine studies but nonetheless marks her as a painter of the city and, specifically, Chicago.

Body addresses both landmarks and nondescript buildings, occasionally from the high viewpoints favored by early moderns. Some pieces emphasize the spaces between structures, others celebrate the overlooked poetry of creations such as the expressway, still others capture seasonal atmosphere in an urban setting. The landscapes and boating pictures are no less able than the others, but the overriding subject is Chicago, and in a work such as "Bend," it holds a strong attraction. (To view the artist's images, visit [www.christinabody.com](http://www.christinabody.com).)

*At 1012 N. Dearborn St. 312-642-4400.*

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