Vito Acconci, *Hole in the Ground*, 1987, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Fred Scruton.

Marilyn Lerner, *Notes from Jaisalmer*, 1986, oil on wood, 24" in diameter.

group of ink drawings from 1985, a visually eclectic series of images relating to the sound waves of harmonics. Some of these drawings were geometric visualizations of the harmonics produced by vibrating an open guitar string of a harmonic guitar, an instrument that Branca invented in 1982. Each of these complex diagrams was derived from the vibrational characteristics of a string expressed in terms of mathematical equations (using numbers to measure the distribution of sound frequency) and linear geometry (to draw the pattern of harmonic nodes). All of the other drawings relate to the purely mathematical properties of the harmonic series, as analyzed and described by mathematicians such as Pythagoras, Fibonacci, and Leibniz. The result is an assortment of very delicate and precise symmetrical patterns, from the interlocking web of variable circles in *Classical Space* to the Op-Art nautilus spiral of *Fluid Symmetry*.

Like his music, Branca's drawings make a very appealing spectacle of the senses out of a basically intellectual exercise. The intricate network of lines in the drawings echoes the massive pulsating wall of sound in his music. The drawings establish their own disorienting vertigo out of a perplexing maze of extremely ordered forms, plotting in a readable form the path that order takes as it moves into the realm of chaos. Represented visually, the turbulent qualities of Branca's most precise music may relate, as his harmonic guitar does, to the strange numerical behavior of fractal geometry. Branca's entire creative output has, in this way, a grasp of sanity and a touch of madness, a way of standing perfectly still and yet be throbbing all the while. Considered in either scientific or esthetic terms, his work embodies both a hot vibrancy and a cold deliberation.

–CARLO McCORMICK

Vito Acconci

International With Monument

Some jokes just aren't funny. I suspect that many observers of Vito Acconci's recent work must feel this way – as if the author of so many magnificently perverse moments in contemporary art has finally gone too far. Acconci's work has always sought to engage as well as confound the viewer, opening up many possible readings and feelings, including disgust. Although we have come to expect him to outrage our sensibilities – as in *Seedbed*, 1971, in which he masturbated while hidden under a platform in a SoHo gallery – his previous work has also stimulated us with its wit and vigor. The perversity of *Seedbed* was the product of an extremely focused vision; in contrast, the randomness and lack of focus of the three projects in this recent exhibition produced a perversity of another order entirely. These new works provoke certain questions: Are viewers so put off by the strange banality and vulgarity (which far exceeds the willful tackiness of kitsch) that the work offers no point of entry to ideas with which to struggle? Is the fact that no one else would think or dare to do this kind of work enough to sustain serious analysis or even speculation?

Landing, 1987, consists of three aluminum rowboats precisely notched together; they intersect at right angles but are slightly tilted on different sloping planes. The bow of one boat is filled with water and a small school of Japanese goldfish. Surrounding the boats and this makeshift aquarium are clusters of lush potted plants. Acconci has taken a hackneyed, formulaic amenity of interior public spaces – the fountain with a diligently maintained plantscape – and given it a new edge in a new light. In place of travertine basins, he has substituted leakproof aluminum boats that seem to have been washed ashore, their function inverted to keep water in rather than out.

In *Overstuffed Chair*, 1987, Acconci has covered an ungainly armchair with a thick coating of gray cement. Corners and edges of the original Naugahyde upholstery poke through the heavy veneer. In the seat of the reconstituted chair are three sitting stools cut to different heights. This abundance of sitting places makes the chair dysfunctional and cancels out any possibility of repose.

The third project, *Hole in the Ground*, 1987, consists of a culvert covered with flagstones, cement, sod, and ferns, and open only at one end. Laid out on the bottom of the culvert is a large rubber mat in the shape of a schematized human figure. This "welcome mat" is supposed to encourage spectators to participate in the sculpture by sliding into the tube, but it did not appear to me to stimulate the spirit of engagement necessary to prompt such action from more than a few people.

These objects are funny, but after the first moments of amusement and bewilderment wore off I felt tremendous uneasiness. Banality no longer seemed quite so interesting. Although the mundane was transformed through juxtaposition and irony, there emerged a sense of both oppressiveness and quiet deception. The initial humor of these pieces had a false gaiety that incompletely obscured a tragic dimension. It is only the evidence of the artist's consciousness that gives this ugly and ordinary work meaning. Acconci's understanding of the complicity of relationships, of the messages and signs contained within objects, has a surgical precision. But these three recent projects are close to becoming cadavers; they are drained of life and strain for significance. They are purposely marginal works, courageous risks, but, finally, noble failures by an artist whose restlessness and reluctance to conform is usually enormously productive and provocative.

–PATRICIA C. PHILLIPS

Marilyn Lerner

John Good Gallery

A statement by Olga Rozanova, one of the leading figures of the early-20th-century Russian avant-garde, kept running through my mind as I looked at the paintings in this show: "The esthetic value of an abstract painting consists in the fullness of its pictorial contents." This statement, published in the catalogue of an exhibition held in Moscow in 1919, seems especially useful to consider now, some 70 years later, given the trend these days that finds a number of artists striving to put back into abstract painting what the

Judith Dolnick, Untitled, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 17 × 20".

David Cale, Smooch Music, 1987. Performance view. Left to right: Roy Nathanson, David Cale, E. J. Rodriguez, and Brad Jones. Photo: Paula Court.

reductive Minimal and Conceptual tendencies dominant in the '60s and '70s had taken out. Marilyn Lerner, to my eye, is one of the most daring of this group. Through her own finely tuned sensitivity to the emblematic potentials of form and a broad range of influences, from her trips to Asia and studies of Tantric philosophy and Javanese gamelan music to the Russian avant-garde, she is creating a style of abstraction that deals directly and unabashedly with the deepest issues of signification.

In *Notes from Jalsimer*, 1987, for example, Lerner's main concerns seem to center about the relationship of time and light. Passage of time is suggested in this circular painting, with its measured composition of arcs and segments executed in black and white. Like a magical sundial it appears to capture time, expressed as the reflection of light from a surface that itself emanates a remarkable spectral glow. Note also the harmony struck between black and white, how the one is incomplete without the other. In the symbolic visual language that Lerner has been constructing, black and white function as both nouns and verbs. In *Notes from Jalsimer*, the white shapes seem to whip like flames through black areas, as if the two tonalities represented the forces of enlightenment and darkness. The artist's versatile use of black and white as expressive elements is found in the joyous musical notes these elements are made to sound in *Circle Dancer*, 1986, a composition that features sweeping, rhapsodic rhythms. Occasionally, Lerner has introduced brilliant phrases of red, as in *Floating Garden*, 1986, *Sangori*, 1986–87, and *Spirit Catcher*, 1987.

Throughout the show, Lerner has demonstrated how it is possible to free form from subservience to color without sacrificing the sensual aspect of abstraction. The appeal to the senses is forthright. Touch is stimulated by the outstanding palpable qualities of these compositions, with their luscious surfaces produced by the creamy handling of oil pigment and their precise, sharp-edged forms, some in low relief. However, bodily responses are the key to unlocking but one level of the rich pictorial contents that are contained in these works. Like the painters of the Russian avant-garde, Lerner is tearing down not part but all of the screen between the worlds of matter and spirit erected by the Western fear of the psyche.

Judith Dolnick

Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer Gallery

Working with an organic vocabulary of colorful forms that she sends spinning across her canvases, Judith Dolnick reveals herself to be an action painter in the deepest sense of this term. The vision she offers is thoroughly in tune with the dynamism that is paramount in nature and that has been significant in so much 20th-century art. The paintings impress as paeans to this dynamic force by virtue of the tremendously evocative force they carry within themselves. That force is produced by the interactions among the highly integrated structures in her compositions, which, far from appearing planned or calculated, seem – much to Dolnick's credit – to have an aura of freedom and abandonment about them. It is released not in a single explosive spurt but in gentle waves that build to a crest of excitement, as the eye travels across the surface of each composition.

By not giving any specific titles to the works, Dolnick encourages her audience to come to visual terms with her paintings without the aid of any overtly literary references. This is not to say that these paintings can or should be taken as strictly formal creations. Rather, their enchantment lies in their very openness. *Untitled*, 1987 (52 by 108 inches), the largest painting in the show, invites an array of associations, dominated perhaps by thoughts about heaven and the notion of universal growth. Both of these readings are brought to mind by the rhythmic interplay of color and shape, the former sparked by the puffy edges of some of the forms, which have a cloudlike lightness about them, and the latter prompted by the way in which certain rounded configurations are echoed throughout the composition.

Dolnick alternates dense passages that are crowded with forms of various shapes and sizes with airy intervals of ground. This is why the surfaces of several of the paintings – such as *Untitled*, 1987 (35 by 70 inches), and *Untitled*, 1987 (17 by 20 inches) – seem to breathe; they provide a striking demonstration of Dolnick's ability to animate pictorial space.

– RONNY COHEN

David Cale, *Smooch Music*

The Kitchen

Just as performance art began to be understood by the general public as a multimedia fusion, an increasing number of performance artists seem to be choosing a completely opposite form of the genre as their preferred method of getting their points across: the comic monologue. In its simplicity, its lack of pretension, and its homemade production style, this "poor theater" cousin offers a kind of karmic balance to the complex, multisensory, and expensive-to-produce mixed-media performance. It's no accident that many of the artists working in this reduced style have sprung from low-rent venues.

Solo turns by performance artists have been inspired by intellectual currents like semiotic and Lacanian investigations of the self, together with broad cultural trends like comedy in the popular media. This mode of performance locates its "impure" show as the direct yet deceptively hidden display of the isolated self, working in the gray area where cultural stereotypes and esoteric concepts collide.

David Cale's version walks a narrow line between basic theatrical conventions and performance-art singularity. As performance art, *Smooch Music*, 1987, flaunted its quirkiness, using its musical accompaniment as an integral part of the show, and tilting its storytelling toward sometimes surprising directions. This was a comic monologue that didn't always go for laughs, a series of tales about romantic yearning that was often ironic. Although it was told from a basically gay stance, this aspect often seemed almost beside the point, so universal were the concerns. Broken up into 24 bits, which ranged from a few lines to lengthy, all-out narratives,