June Spiezer: "Whatever I Was Looking At"

A Post 1960 Collection of Chicago Art
September 9 - October 18, 2008
Cover: Ed Paschke
Red Sweeney, 1975 (detailed)
oil on canvas
74 x 40
June Spiezer:
Whatever I Was Looking At
A Post-1960s Collection of Chicago

“Francis and June were two wonderful characters; well, June still is. In the 30 years I had an art gallery they were the best collectors I ever encountered—with the purest excitement and most sincere passion about art and artists. Different personalities. Francis always let June shine, and shine she did; with her irreverent jokes and mismatched, yet thematic, earrings. Francis on the other hand was comparatively taciturn yet ribald at all the right times. June is passionate, Francis pragmatic. These were ‘real’ people. Older in body but younger in spirit than their peers—or even those decades younger than them. Art keep them young and engaged. Not only would they identify with a work of art, but they’d want to know the artist and have a relationship with him or her.”

—Paul Klein, Art Curator, Writer, and Art Dealer
The June and Francis Collection of Chicago Art is the largest existing collection of Chicago Art from the period of around 1960 to the present. In its way it is a monument of its kind, rich in quality and variety, showing a wide range of media and an even wider range of ideas. It is guaranteed, when viewed as a whole, to expand any person’s ideas of Chicago art. It is also a gateway to viewing the unique personality of Chicago art. Much of this work is gradually coming to be valued as equally significant by comparison with artwork coming from more well known artists in New York, the West Coast and Europe.

Though many pieces from the collection have been lent out for various exhibits around the world, this is the first showing of a large selection of the collection outside of The Rockford Art Museum or tours of the Spiezer residence.

In 2006, the Pennsylvania Academy of Art had a showing of Chicago Art from the 1920’s through to the 1980’s. It included Ed Paschke’s “Red Sweeney” from the Spiezer collection and exhibited many of the same artists represented in the Spiezer collection. This exhibit, Art in Chicago: Resisting Regionalism, Transforming Modernism was curated by Robert Cossolino, who commented:

“There’s a real need for rethinking 20th-century art to include the whole country. One of the unique characteristics of Chicago is there’s always been a very pronounced effort to not be derivative, to not follow the status quo. They insisted on following their own vision.”

Many critics and art writers found this show a revelation. Critic, Mark Brandl, of the online magazine Shark Forum has commented:

“When it comes to aesthetic and creative movements, Chicago is often more closely connected with architecture and music than painting and sculpture. However, a new Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts exhibition—curated by a native of Chicago—aims to give a new look at the Second City as a place that inspired and produced trailblazing visual art.”
The current showcase of a large portion of the Spiezer collection hopes to add weight to the case that Chicago Art is ripe for reevaluation. The question of what value Chicago art has is an important one. It effects the range of what art is seen on the world stage and Chicago art has frequently been short changed on this account. The reasons for the relative neglect of Chicago Art on the international art scene are complex.

Major art magazines, major auction houses like Sotheby’s and Christies, and major art dealers and critics are located on the East and West Coast and in Europe. The national art magazines have representatives here but don’t always give major space to Chicago art. For reasons known only to themselves Chicago Museums have not been advocates of showcasing Chicago artists in any great numbers. But with this exhibit, Carthage College hopes to open more eyes to the distinct personalities and wonderful inventive powers of Chicago artists.

June Spiezer has commented:

“In New York City many artists seek to follow what is trendy, but Chicago artists choose to see the world their own way. They don’t give a damn about what other people consider ‘new,’ but make their own standards for what is ‘new.’ As a result Chicago artists have a strong tendency to be fresher, more creative in their art. In a sense, the relative isolation of Chicago art means artists are free to do what they like and this makes them more interesting!”

How the Collection Came About

June and Francis Spiezer first got started in collecting when they saw work by some artists in exhibits in the Hyde Park area. Some of the artists went on to become members of the “Hairy Who” and “The Chicago Imagists.” Their interest in the art led the Spiezer’s to take a class in “Art as Investment” which included an on-site visit to the gallery area in downtown Chicago. They met artists and were fascinated. An interesting new world seemed to open for them both through the artwork they saw and socializing with the artists. Early on they decided on their “method” of collecting. They would only purchase things if they both liked them, and thought they would concentrate on young and upcoming
artists, finding them more “affordable” but also with the thought that artists, early in their career, needed support from collectors. Their choice of those that were once considered “young and upcoming” artists has been proven by time to be unfailingly accurate. To give but one example, early on they collected the small sculpture “White Hand” by John Philip Myers, now a highly respected sculptor. They bought this work for several hundred dollars, and has increased in market value by one hundred fold. Such was their passion for collecting that they often paid for things on “time” and there were months when they were sending off payments on four recently collected paintings at once! Though June and Francis frequently agreed on the artists they liked there were occasions when they disagreed 100%. Rather interestingly Francis liked the work of Leon Golub and June did not. June liked the work of Robert Lostutter and Francis said “No way!” Neither artist is represented in the collection.

They felt a loyalty to Chicago artists. They ate, drank and discussed life and art with them and enjoyed their company. They had a unique feeling for the personalities of the artists and had what art dealers often refer to as “a magic eye.” They also felt a loyalty to Chicago gallery owners, with whom they developed friendships. June Spiezer comments:

“Let other people from other cities support their galleries, we have to support ours. Francis and I both knew we would buy primarily from Chicago galleries and artists because they were available, we could talk to them. I see these artists around. They’re friendly, and I like this, rather than buying some artist from New York or California I don’t know and won’t see.”

Chicago’s Various Artistic Styles

Chicago artists are strongly individualistic in their approach to aesthetics. Yet there are elements in Chicago Area art which establish some basic stylistic directions that reflect on Chicago’s unique personality. The following short survey represents only a start of a list of Chicago Art styles and categories.

In considering trends in Chicago art by far the best known groups are often lumped together under the name “The Chicago Imagists.” This includes, “The Monster Roster” (post war artists who started making a name in the 1950’s), the “Hairy Who,” and “The Chicago Imagists” who start to be active in the early
and mid 1960's. These are fairly lose groups in that each artist has their own style but they all manipulate imagery from the seamy underside of urban life; tattoos, comic books, advertising, old signs and labels, junk, etc. They share a sardonic viewpoint, mixed with a taste for the grotesque and fantastic, and utilize super intense color often in flat, decorative, playing card like designs. Their work frequently blurs the line between what is funky what is philosophical, what is outrageous and what is poetic. Notable examples are Paschke’s “Red Sweeney,” Roger Brown’s “The Earth from Outer Space” Karl Wursum’s “Inner E Stare Bonnet” (with a strong anticipation of the design of the Dalek creatures of “Dr. Who” fame), and Jim Nutt’s “Oh, My Goodness.”

Then there is a group of Chicago abstractionists, who, unlike the more formal and geometry oriented abstractions of post-Mondrian Europe, or the painterly abstractions of the New York Expressionists, prefer something more machine like, kinetic and fast moving, with an element of “Futuristic” energy. Lines have a way of being spun out, like a fast moving elevated trains or traffic blurred in motion on an expressway, their layouts often involves sequence of shapes spinning or interweaving. Such works as those by Josh Garber’s “Swim” or Jim Lutes’ “I Should Have Called” represent this aspect of Chicago Art. Art Green’s “Good Intentions” has the dynamism of a layered overhead map of a shopping mall or modern multi-faceted building, Julia Fish's “Great Divide” creates a different kind of dynamism by contrasting dark and light, geometric and soft, in a yin yang tableaux that is part enigma, part aerial map.

Then there is the art of the theatrical and quasi-surreal which often involve a fantastic landscape with curious, slightly surreal scenario being played out on it. Examples of this genre frequently involve images of Chicago’s streets, buildings, backyards, slums, trash heaps and parks. This can be seen in works like Hollis Sigler’s “It Keeps Her Going” or Steven Hudson’s “Apocalyptic Millennium 16, The Launderer” or Mark Summer Forth’s “Night Train” which reveals a distinctly Midwestern bedroom with golden neon light falling through a window onto the lone sleeper. Anne Farley Gaines, “Pinions of Light” juxtaposes floral, animal and water imagery before a burning street for curious mixture of ecstasy and tragedy. There is work in this category that is surrealist but narrative, suggesting elements of a story or myth, examples would be Jim Mesple’s “Jonah and Persephone” or Susanne Doremus’ “Interior with Mirror.” All these works reflects Chicago’s visual urban environment pushed into the realms of high imagination and fantasy.
Another strong element in Chicago Art is wild humor, though the wit and fun in the art are often intended to conceal deeper meanings. Such a work as Gladys Nilsson’s “Hall of Mirrors” is one example. In it, a mischievous strip show, or lingerie fashion show, seems to be taking place. It is performed by creatures, which are half children’s illustration and half cartoon, and lays out a tableau that is vaguely reminiscent of a “roaring twenties” “speak easy” saloon floorshow. Shang-ah Choi’s “Eyes” inhabits something of the same humorous, fantastic world, with doll-like blond Venus’s transfiguring into ancient Greek statues and back again in a misty, antediluvian landscape. Ray Yoshida’s “Playful Private Pricking” is a painting of witty visual double entendres but still manages to create a luminous, beautiful atmosphere. Rather surprisingly many of the glass pieces in Chicago Art are humorous, like Richard Marquis’ “Crazy Quilt Teapot” or John Phillip Myers, “White Hand” portraying a hand, which seems to be transforming into something like sliced bread. It is a sculpture funny and nightmarish at the same time. Another strange hand, this one in a puppet glove, very different in effect, appears in Spencer Dornitzer’s “I Have Quiet Demons” but it is also part fun and part bad dream.

Then there is a genre of painting that might be considered “grotesque.” Works which look at ugliness as a high form of character, suggesting suffering and pain as lessons that can be learned from. Such works as Joe Siegenmeister’s “Sheldon” unlock disturbing levels of pain and dementia, but also invites a degree of compassion. Tom Czarnopys, “Untitled” bronze sculpture of a cringing baby in a chrysalis, is similar in feeling and hints at the forces of creation having a dark, nightmarish side.

Chicago Artists also often seem fascinated by everyday objects, and some of their works might fall into the category of a kind of “Magic Realism.” These are sharply observed and tightly painted pieces of small chunks of reality, often with a slightly surreal tweaking. Frank Trankina’s “Red Shoes” is one example, where a pair of red shoes has a curious resonance, reminiscent perhaps of an important memory that is only hinted at, never stated. Very different but still object based, is Jo Hormuth’s hilarious “Frozen Turkey Dinners” which manages to evoke twisted balloons, pet dachshunds, hot dogs, and erect phalluses at one and the same time. John Littleton and Katherine Vogel’s glass sculpture “Bag Explosion” turns images of paper bags into jewel like objects that seem to dance to some unheard music.
The Collection: Past, Present and Future

The Spiezer collection is notable as the only collection of Chicago Art of the period that is partially housed in, and the majority of the collection is ceded perpetually to, a major museum, the Rockford Art Museum. The Spiezers observed that too much donated work was consigned to the basement of the Chicago Art Institute so they began to look around for institutions that would show their collection, not just store it. They wanted the art they owned to be enjoyed by people. Francis Spiezer was in the service in Rockford during World War II. While there, he found that the people of Rockford were immensely friendly; they would never let him pay for a meal when he sat down in a restaurant. As he had such good memories of the city, the Spiezers worked out an arrangement with the Rockford Art Museum where the entire collection would be willed to the museum, with a certain portion turned over to the museum on a yearly basis. Other stipulations were that every ten years, forever, the collection would have to be shown in its entirety, and that the collection could never be broken up or sold. At this writing about two thirds of the collection is housed in the Rockford Art Museum and one third resides in the Spiezer residence. As Mrs. Spiezer adds a new work she usually cedes a work to Rockford to make room for the new one to hang in her home. The Rockford Art Museum also has the advantage of the possessing the largest art museum exhibition space in Illinois outside of Chicago.

The Spiezer Collection includes paintings, prints, drawings, assemblages, ceramics, sculptures, mixed media, a few objects without classification and a very considerable collection of fine art glass. This largesse of vision is possible because, with a few notable exceptions, the Spiezers have chosen only one work per artist, concentrating on choosing a key work by most of the artists in their collection. But what glorious choices they have made! June Spiezer is still collecting and the collection is growing. Every ten years the Rockford Art Museum shows the entire collection and the next such show is slated for 2009.
Listed Works

Leon Applebaum  
Lapis Blue Snake Vase, n.d.  
bLOWn glass  
14 1/2 x 7 1/2 diameter  

Chuck Beckwith  
Untitled, 1991  
wood inlaid with ceramic mosaic  
3 1/2 x 7 1/4 x 6 1/2  

Sonia Blomdahl  
Charm Bowl, 1990  
blown and fused glass spheres  
8 1/2 x 13 diameter  

Nicholas Blosser  
Hot June, 1989  
tempera on wood  
11 x 16  

Phyllis Bramson  
Then is Now, Now is Then, 1991-92  
mixed media  
36 1/4 x 77  

Roger Brown  
View of the Earth from Outer Space, 1980  
oil on canvas  
18 x 35 3/4  

Sang-ah Choi  
Eyes, 2001  
acrylic, sumi ink, felt tip pen, gold leaf paint, and polymer resin coating on wood panel  
10 x 32  

Antonia Contro  
Untitled (landscape with wishbones), n.d.  
oil on canvas  
8 x 14  

Janet Cooling  
Female Snake, 1980  
oil on canvas  
14 x 11  

Ke Ke Cribbs  
Silky, 1986  
glass  
11 x 5 1/8 x 4 3/4  

Tom Czarnopsys  
Untitled, 1989  
cast bronze with patinas  
16 x 8 x 10  

Susanne Doremus  
Interior with Mirror, 1984  
oil on canvas  
52 x 63 1/2  

Spenser A. Dornitzer  
I Have Quiet Demons, 1994  
oil on canvas  
13 x 15  

L.J. Douglas  
Waiting for Oedipus, 1982  
oil on canvas  
62 x 48  

Kathleen Eggert  
Untitled, n.d.  
glass  
10 x 10 x 7 1/4  

Sarah Barnhardt Fields  
Housescape #9, 1990  
stick and pastel on paper  
26 x 26  

Julia Fish  
Great Divide, 1986  
oil on canvas  
20 x 48  

Mark Sumner Forth  
Night Train, 1990  
oil on canvas  
38 3/4 x 46 1/2  

Anne Farley Gaines  
Pinions of Light, n.d.  
watercolor on paper  
28 x 36  

Josh Garber  
Swim, 1995  
welded steel  
28 x 16 x 14  

Rachel Josephers Gaspers  
Sowelv l, 1991  
glass and mortar  
15 1/2 x 16 x 4 1/2  

John Glick  
Untitled Box, n.d.  
ceramic  
5 1/2 x 4 3/4 x 4 1/2  

Harry Gold  
Dreamscape, n.d.  
oil on canvas  
29 x 23  

Michelle Grabner  
Fishing Net, 1995  
oil on board  
19 x 23  

Art Green  
Good Intentions, 1980  
oil on canvas  
34 3/8 diameter (tondo)  

Chrsie Heinrich  
Jasmine, n.d.  
ceramic  
11 1/4 x 7 1/2 x 9  

Tim Lowly  
Well, 1992  
tempera on handkerchief  
16 1/4 x 16 1/2
John Henry
Matathias’ Legacy, 1988
painted aluminum
19 x 14 x 14

Steven Heyman
Untitled, 1991
acrylic on canvas
36 x 48

Jesse Hickman
East Winter 31/92, 1992
oil, pigmented gesso, and shellac on wood
9 1/2 x 10

Jesse Hickman
South Winter 91/92, 1992
oil, pigmented gesso, and shellac on wood
9 1/2 x 10

Francis and Michael Higgens
Plate, n.d.
glass
3/4 x 9 7/16 diameter

Steven Hudson
Millenium 16/ The Launderer, 1993
oil on canvas
36 x 47

Dorothy Hughes
Untitled, n.d.
wood, plaster and paint
17 1/2 x 9 x 7 1/2

Richard Hull
Aimless Resolve (Trism Trasm), 1985
oil and wax on linen
36 x 48

Richard Jolley
How Do I Look?, n.d.
cast glass
12 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 5

Gary Justis
Untitled, 1987
aluminum
23 x 18.5 x 7

Robert Kameczura
What we are, what we think we are, what other people think we are, 2004
acrylic on canvas
52 x 50

June Kaneko
Untitled (gold square on blue circle), 1988
ceramic
26 1/2 x 21 x 3

Terry Karpowicz
Untitled, n.d.
wood with marble base
16 1/2 x 17 x 4 1/4

Jacqueline (Jackie) Kazarian
Not Knot #18, 1991
acrylic on canvas
34 x 34

John Kearney
Giraffe, n.d.
metal sculpture
28 x 5 x 11

Richard Kooyman
Crazy Box, 1987
wood
8 1/2 x 7 3/4 x 4 3/4

Linda Kramer
Landscape with Two Eggs, 2007
mixed media on wood
25 x 25

Joel Philip Myers
White Hand, c. 1973
glass
11 1/8 x 5 1/4 x 4 1/2

Jeffrey Nichols
Sweep Spout, 1996
mixed media
14 x 21 x 5 1/2

Glady’s Nilsson
Half of Mirrors, 1980-81
acrylic on canvas
12 1/2 x 16 1/2

Jim Nutt
Oh! My Goodness (No No), 1977
etching on paper
20 1/2 x 20 1/2

Ralph L. Odes
Untitled Figure, 1995
marble
20 1/2 x 10 1/4 x 6 1/2

Colleen Ott
Untitled (camel paper-weight), n.d.
glass and metal
6 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 3 1/2

Ed Paschke
Red Sweeney, 1975
oil on canvas
74 x 40

Hargrave, Kathleen and Robert Speilholz
Wolf at the Door, 1990
blown glass vessel
12 1/4 x 10 3/4

Michelle Stone
Portrait of Jackie Moses, 2007
oil paint on canvas
14 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donna Tadelman</td>
<td><strong>Beckoning</strong>, 1991</td>
<td></td>
<td>oil on linen</td>
<td>14 1/2 x 16 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lino Tagliapietra</td>
<td><strong>F31 Murano</strong>, 1982</td>
<td></td>
<td>blown glass vessel</td>
<td>3 x 18.5 diameter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tony Tasset</td>
<td><strong>Still Life</strong>, 1986</td>
<td></td>
<td>mixed media, wine bottle, two wine glasses, leather, black lacquered frame</td>
<td>38 x 30 1/2 x 7 1/2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maria Tomasula</td>
<td><strong>Rite</strong>, 1994</td>
<td></td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
<td>18 x 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Trankina</td>
<td><strong>Red Shoes</strong>, 1992</td>
<td></td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
<td>14 x 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Van Wagner</td>
<td><strong>Matter of Abstraction</strong>, 1990</td>
<td></td>
<td>linoleum, concrete, bark and oil paint on masonite with painted lace</td>
<td>43 x 24 x 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janusz Walentynowicz</td>
<td><strong>Untitled</strong>, n.d.</td>
<td></td>
<td>cast glass</td>
<td>5 1/2 x 9 x 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chuck Walker</td>
<td><strong>Hospital Tree</strong>, 1985</td>
<td></td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
<td>30 x 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Wharton</td>
<td><strong>Bread and Butter</strong>, 1990</td>
<td></td>
<td>mixed media construction</td>
<td>5 1/2 x 9 1/4 x 6 1/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna Tadelman</td>
<td><strong>Two Eggs Balanced</strong>, 1992</td>
<td></td>
<td>oil and leaf on panel</td>
<td>15 3/4 x 22 3/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lino Tagliapietra</td>
<td><strong>Blown Glass</strong>, 1989</td>
<td></td>
<td>Blown Glass</td>
<td>12 x 6 x 4 diameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Wilbat</td>
<td><strong>Inner “E” Stare Bonnet</strong>, 1989</td>
<td></td>
<td>lithograph</td>
<td>19 1/8 x 14 1/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Yoshida</td>
<td><strong>Playful Private Pricking</strong>, 1982</td>
<td></td>
<td>acrylic on canvas</td>
<td>32 x 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ann “Toots” Zynsky</td>
<td><strong>Green Bowl</strong>, 1985</td>
<td></td>
<td>pulled glass strands; slumped and fused</td>
<td>4 1/2 x 15 1/2 diameter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Robert Kameczura
Robert Kameczura is a Chicago artist, arts activist and arts writer. He is the fine arts critic for Big Shoulders magazine (www.sobs.org), and the founder of The Mythopian Artists Group.

Rockford Art Museum
One of the largest art museums in Illinois, Rockford Art Museum features a changing array of dynamic, award-winning contemporary exhibitions that showcase a variety of genres, styles and media. RAM houses an extensive collection of American art from the 19th century through today, with a focus on work by historic and contemporary regional artists as well as American Masters, Glass Art, Modern and Contemporary Art, Outsider Art, and Photography. Important RAM collections include the Francis and June Speizer Collection of Art, the Temmie and Arnold Gilbert Collection of Photography, the Hager Collection of Self-Taught African American Art, and the Francis Minert Collection of Photography.

Opening Reception:
Sunday, September 14, 2008 from 1-4 p.m.

Regular Gallery Hours:
Tuesday–Friday • 10 a.m.–3 p.m.
Thursday evening • 6-8 p.m.
Saturday • 1-4 p.m.

For more information, please contact Diane Levesque at (262) 551-5853 or send an email to dlevesque@carthage.edu. To learn more about the H. F. Johnson Gallery of Art please visit www.carthage.edu/dept/art/gallery.