

# Art in America

March 2004

## Michael Lazarus at San Francisco Art Institute and Feature

If, like me, you were not familiar with Michael Lazarus's work, these bicoastal, back-to-back exhibitions provided a chance to catch up. Together, they featured over 20 paintings on wood panel as well as prints, and spanned the late '90s, when the artist first starting showing, to the present. The San Francisco show included some of the earlier work, while New York focused on the new.

With mostly symmetrical compositions resembling mandalas or Rorschach inkblots, Lazarus's work is heady and hypnotic. Colors and patterns pulsate; layered spaces implode, recede or whirl into infinity. But what makes Lazarus's abstract art really tick is his combination of psychedelic and tribal imagery. In an untitled piece (2002-03), at Feature, red and yellow stripes simultaneously radiate and spiral out from a small, distant masklike face hovering in the center of a proscenium space. The striking optical imagery recalls both Bridget Riley and African art, while the iconic mask is clearly derived from the latter. Elsewhere in his oeuvre, Aboriginal dot patterns, Islamic arabesques and Chinese fire motifs lend a mystical, ancient aspect to his art.

The mask is an almost constant presence in Lazarus's work,

though not always in a whole or intact form—finding it becomes a little game. In *Embrace* (2002), a small (14 by 12 inches) but potent piece at the San Francisco Art Institute, a mask dissolves into a prismatic starburst in tones of blue streaked with red. Only its cat eyes and jack-o'-lantern nose are left behind, staring out from the picture plane. In the all-yellow, chevron-shaped *Taken Back* (2002), at Feature, the same mask form—here cut in half lengthwise and turned sideways—becomes a schematic sea of boats or waves all fashioned in cutout plywood. Another trick Lazarus plays is seamlessly incorporating collaged photographs cut from magazines within the painted areas. If you look closely at the red-and-yellow-striped work mentioned above, you will discover that a cutout photo of a breathtaking, snowy mountain range forms the mask's eyes, nose and mouth, while the proscenium floor is tiled with tantalizing squares of flesh-color photos of naked bodies. Arousal of any kind—physical, natural, optical, spiritual—seems to be the artist's aim here.

Lazarus stretches the recent vogue for psychedelic imagery into the more visually rich territory of Surrealist collage. At times his work gets bogged down in its own abstract acrobatics, becoming contrived and overwrought. Yet the small work called *Driven There* (2001), in San Francisco, a cruder, slightly off-center woodblock-style image in red, black and blue, strikes the right balance between the iconic and the abstract, meditation and decoration, the mirrored space within the painting and the gallery corner into which it is folded.

—Melissa E. Feldman

Michael Lazarus: Untitled, 2002-03, collage, oil and enamel paint on wood panel, 69 by 72 inches; at Feature.

