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Ray Donley's *The Sorcerer*, 2010,
at Laura Rathe Fine Art

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ARTNOTES

New Masters: The final month of the spring season is packed with notables, both art stars and promising up-and-comers. In the first category we cite

James Surls, who returns for a show at **Barbara Davis Gallery** featuring an epic wall drawing (May 14 – July 3), concurrent with his “Magnificent Seven” at **Rice University** campus (through August) ... Surls’ pal since the days of Lawndale’s founding, internationally exhibited Fifth Ward native son **Bert Long Jr.**, shines in one of the **Jung Center**’s most stellar exhibits of the past decade; Long takes as his inspiration the just released, posthumously published *The Red Book* by **Carl Jung** (through May 28) ... **Inman Gallery** mounts an exquisite installation by San Francisco painter

Darren Waterston that may be the best work of his remarkable career to date (May 8 – June 19) ... **Ctrl Gallery** invites New York-based Houston native **Jackie Gendel** (daughter of performing arts patrons **Diane** and **Harry Gendel**) to co-curate with **Tom McGrath** the intriguingly titled “Precarity and the Butter Tower” (May 7 – June 19) ... On Gallery Row, **Laura Rathe Fine Art** serves up mid-career Austin painter **Ray Donley**, whose portraits bow to Rembrandt and other old masters, featuring masked figures and archetypes such as the sorcerer (May 1 – 29) ... **McMurtrey Gallery** brings collage impresario **Lance Letscher** to town for the Austin artist’s newest book, *The Perfect Machine*, a volume billed as children’s fare that’s a must for serious art collectors (Saturday, May 15). **Power Gals**

Plus Mr. Alexander: **McClain Gallery** showcases Rice University art department head **Karin Broker**, whose media range from Surrealist sculpture to Baroque-inflected still lifes in what will be one of the most anticipated openings of the season (May 6 – June 10), coupled with a cocktail evening for **John Alexander**’s debut of a major new canvas, accompanied by a new flight of drawings (May 7 – June 10) ... At **Off the Wall Gallery**, child prodigy/recent UCLA fine art grad **Alexandra Nechita** arrives for a PA (uncrating May 15; openings May 22 and 23); word’s out Nechita will be adding glass, bronze, and aluminum sculpture to her repertoire as well as her signature expressionistic paintings. **Fast Cars/Perfect Pairings/Paintings as**

Poems: Photorealist extraordinaire **Cheryl Kelley**’s latest love affair with muscle cars and tailfins takes over **New Gallery** (opening May 1) ... At **Texas Gallery**, **Carl Palazzolo**’s quiet canvases are layered with understated metaphors that reference time and memory (through May 15) ... Two spaces pair hometown talents and New York types. At **Wade Wilson Art**, the father of Houston abstraction, **Dick Wray**, is highlighted via new black-and-white canvases, concurrent with translucent gestural paintings by **Danielle Frankenthal** (through May 29). At **Deborah Colton Gallery**, Artadia 2010 Houston awardee **Nathaniel Donnett** opens alongside Whitney Biennial-exhibited provocateur **Marianne Vitale** (May 8 – June 26). For more Art Notes and hot topics, head to papercitymag.com. Catherine D. Ansporn

Marianne Vitale and Nathaniel Donnett

Colton & Farb Gallery, Houston

Through June 26, 2010

by Erin Kimmel



Marianne Vitale

Presser, 2010

Plaster, gauze, wood, found material, and acrylic paint

Courtesy the artist and Colton & Farb Gallery



Nathaniel Donnett, *Ring Shout, Gamin' On Ya; S.P.C.*, 2010

For complete caption see image gallery

It is easy, upon first glance, to attribute the synergy of the two mixed-media exhibitions on view at Colton & Farb Gallery to the recent critical and commercial success of Marianne Vitale and Nathaniel Donnett. Vitale, who is based in New York, was recently included in the Whitney Biennial, and Donnett, who is Houston-based, is a 2010 Artadia Award recipient. As disparate as they are in their style and subject matter, the wistful gravity engendered by the surrealist impulses at the heart of both artists' practice unite Vitale's *Presser* and Donnett's *Tha Paper Bag Kids in da Soulciestic Playground*.

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Presser is a modest collection of prints, paintings and sculptures produced by Vitale within the past year. The dynamic neon scrawls in her six intricate prints entitled *Flushed Up* mingle with the dense, saturated brushstrokes of large-scale, abstract canvases such as *I Got Rid of the Horse and Now There is Only You*. Two sinewy relief sculptures of a navel and an elbow from her *Healthcare Series* are painted a burnt pink that recalls the color of an old hospital waiting room. On the floor, a discarded mini-motorbike appropriated from the area surrounding the gallery is encased in a plaster rock painted the same burnt pink. Moving back and forth between the individual pieces in the amalgam illuminates the forceful *élan vital* that is the modus operandi of Vitale's practice. Her sculptures swell out of her prints and drawings with an automatism that she has described as "letting the work define itself." The result is something akin to series of stills depicting an entropic explosion, or implosion, depending on the viewer's choice of perambulatory path.

While Vitale's raw material is the stuff of the unconscious, Nathaniel Donnett's raw material is the stuff of childhood memory, specifically that of the African-American community. Last year Donnett mounted a show at the Lawndale Art Center entitled *Paper or Plastic?*, which explored the intersection of racial hierarchies and the education system. Here he moves his exploration of the construction of African-American identity beyond the classroom and into the playground. After all, it is at recess, between dodging bullies and negotiating cliques that children learn the social codes not discussed in the classroom. Donnett's exploration of these social patterns eschews the black-white racial binary in favor of an investigation of colorism: a social phenomenon in which preferential treatment within an ethnic group is accorded to persons of lighter skin tone.

The installation seethes with racially loaded found materials, images and witticisms. Each of the twelve predominantly figurative collages is rendered on an assemblage of brown paper lunch bags. The canvases reference "the brown paper bag test," a ritual that denied anyone whose skin tone was darker than the bag access to education. In one pithily titled collage, *Luv Tha Way You Carry Your Self Love; A.J.*, a young girl whose head is rendered in black plastic bags kneels in the foreground hugging an iconic African statue. Suspended in the background of many of these collages are dreamlike playgrounds where, for example, swings and slides are replaced by living room furniture. A video of an empty playground and two sculptural installations round out the exhibition. In one room, Donnett constructs a basketball court out of a blackboard, a milk crate and a collection of black and white books. There is nothing akin to the multiple choice tests Donnett scattered on the desks and encouraged viewers to take in his Lawndale show, but the educational vernacular is the same. By materially and linguistically deconstructing early educational environments,

shuffling their contents and deftly reconstructing them, Donnett creates a cerebral playground whose unpredictable twists and turns invite pause.

Both exhibitions speak to the dialectical tension between unconscious and consciousness, whether it's Donnett's unexpected placement of a couch where one would expect a simple swing or the vitalism inherent in Vitale's drawings dictating the content of what is to come sculpturally. Of art writing Eileen Myles has said, "The rupture with reality one feels when writing about art is that there is a tendency to make manifestos out of someone else's play." There will be no manifesto here. Neither Vitale nor Donnett's play is prescriptive; it is simply and refreshingly provoking.

Erin Kimmel is a freelance writer based in Marfa, Texas.

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Marianne Vitale: New Work 🎨

Presented by [Colton & Farb Gallery \(formerly Deborah Colton Gallery\)](#) at [Colton & Farb Gallery \(formerly Deborah Colton Gallery\)](#)

May 8-June 26, 2010

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Carolyn Farb and Deborah Colton are pleased to announce an exhibition of new work by the quixotic New York artist [Marianne Vitale](#) at Colton & Farb Gallery, Houston.

Marianne Vitale: New Work is on view May 8th, 2010 to June 26th, 2010; Opening Reception: Saturday, May 8th, 6:00 to 8:00 pm.

In a vibrant series of large paintings, dense and thick with pigment, Vitale hypertrophies the intricate intimacy of her pen and ink drawings into a churning no-fly zone over the contemporary. Accompanying these canvases, Vitale has constructed one of her hybrid sculptures out of found material and debris reclaimed from the neighborhoods surrounding the gallery. Also on view are two series of drawings: five colorful and riddling pen and ink compositions (2008), and nine fast and forcible sequential graphite drawings on copper-coated paper (2009).

This is Vitale's third exhibition with Deborah Colton: *Chemical City* (2007), a group show in which Vitale presented *Crude Oil on Silk* and *Flipper Baritone*, among other works, and later that year a solo production entitled *Tryst at Um Sty*.

Marianne Vitale is a New York artist working in various mediums. Her sculptural practice often evokes an idea of the natural world remade from what has been discarded and abandoned. Recently brought together with metal and made permanent, Vitale freezes these forms into make-shift structures, fantastic creatures, hybrid animals and contorted beasts that can appear both fragile and menacing. Sometimes sympathetic, often uneasy, Vitale's sculptures pull the tension between figure and abstraction, mid-process of either melting or forming, with skin dripping from their frames. These extracts stretch, move, coil, hide, and invite to mark an encounter of sinister illusoriness.

When using performance and video, Vitale draws on the instinctive yet carefully sculpted absurdity apparent in her drawings and sculptures, with an added personal physicality that creates a visceral, even combative relationship between artist and audience. Vitale's work has been exhibited internationally, including the 2010 Whitney Biennial, SculptureCenter, White Columns, Kunstverein NY, all in New York; Kling & Bang, Reykjavik, Iceland; Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston, Texas; IBID Projects, London, UK; and the Cass Sculpture Foundation, Sussex, England.

Colton & Farb Gallery is part of Deborah Colton Gallery, which is founded on being an innovative showcase for ongoing presentation and promotion of strong historical and visionary contemporary artists world-wide, whose diverse practices include painting, works on paper, sculpture, video, photography, performance and conceptual future media installations.

This exhibition is running in tandem with [Nathaniel Donnett: Black Plastic and the Paper Bag Kids in the Soulecastic Playground](#).