

Installation view

## Liz Cohen, *Trabantimino*

★★★★★

**Salon 94 Bowery**, through Nov 11 (see Lower East Side/East Village)

Appropriately for an artist based in Detroit, Liz Cohen has immersed herself in the intricacies of the automobile, presenting it as a locus of social and political histories. In a twisted take on *Pimp My Ride*, Cohen has spent the past eight years perfecting her skills as a grease monkey, engineering a sculpture that combines two very different vehicles into one awkward but intriguing whole. *Trabantimino* is a literal fusion of an East German Trabant, acquired by the artist in 2002, with an American Chevrolet El Camino. Both are Cold War vintage, but while the European model is utilitarian, boxy and beige, its domestic counterpart is a glitzy low-rider. The resultant hybrid distributes the compact bodywork of the former along the latter's extended chassis.

If *Trabantimino* is, as it appears to be, a strong but simple metaphor for the traditional friction between European and American sensibilities and the rough ride toward globalization, Cohen complicates matters by adding a wall of small black-and-white photographs depicting the tools used in the car's assembly. What might have been an entirely straightforward accompaniment is surprisingly nuanced, the images' stark beauty rubbing up against the inadvertent poetry of their captions (SHORT TESTER, EDGE PULLER, COLD KNIFE).

Finally, a suite of color shots displayed in the gallery's nearby Freeman Alley branch portrays the artist in a grungy garage, adopting positions inspired by those of 1970s Romanian gymnastics star Nadia Comaneci but simultaneously evocative of American pinups. Again, East meets West, with predictably uncomfortable results.—*Michael Wilson*

## Danh Vo, "Autoerotic Asphyxiation"

★★★★★

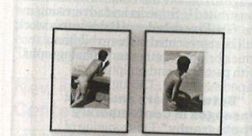
**Artists Space**, through Nov 7 (see Museums)

This quietly complex American debut by Vietnamese-Danish artist Danh Vo appears initially to offer little more than empty space, with sheer white curtains covering long walls of windows.

Between the windows, however, half veiled, hang photographs—vintage images of Vietnam, reprinted in velvety black and white. Most show lithe young men, often caught surreptitiously, shirtless or acting casually affectionate with other men. Visitors can look at them through the gauzy fabric, or part the curtains for a clearer view, thus toggling between nostalgia and voyeurism.

Other items include a framed codicil to a will, in which someone named Joseph Carrier leaves his personal belongings to the artist; a group portrait of 19th-century Catholic priests holding hands; and a plaque with chillingly matter-of-fact instructions for executing people by hanging.

Another plaque, engraved with a tersely annotated checklist of the exhibition, begins to reveal



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connections among these disparate elements. Carrier, it turns out, took the photos of the young men while working as a counterinsurgency specialist during the Vietnam War; later, he researched herbicides and wrote books about homosexuality in Mexico, which are also on display. One of the pictured priests was executed in Vietnam (after running afoul of a prohibition against proselytizing) and, in a farewell letter to his father—copied out here by the artist's father—compared his impending death by beheading to the cutting of a flower, like those embroidered on some of the curtains. Through such associations, fragments of relationships, narratives and histories seem to fill the room, ensnaring us in a net of contingent meanings.—*Joseph R. Wolin*

## "Gordon Onslow Ford: Paintings and Works on Paper 1939–1951"

★★★★★

**Francis M. Naumann Fine Art**, through Dec 23 (see 57th Street area)

This rare exhibition of work by Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003) illuminates the early career of a painter best known—if he's known at all—for pictographic abstractions featuring mandala-like orbs, wriggling lines and glowing dots. It traces his peregrination from wartime Europe to postwar California, and his evolution from youthful Surrealist to full-blown visionary artist.

Born in England, Onslow Ford resigned a commission in the Royal Navy at age 24 to pursue a career as an artist in Paris. By the late 1930s, he and his friend, the Chilean artist Roberto Matta, both newly admitted to the Surrealist circle and immersed in the speculative writings of philosopher P.D. Ouspensky, were attempting to paint multidimensional space, both physical and psychic. But unlike Matta's imaginary worlds, which were rendered in atmospheric drifts of color, Onslow Ford's were almost illustrational: *Crime to Crime* (1939),



for example, resembles a brightly hued navigational chart as conceived by Carroll Dunham. It looks crisp and contemporary.

In 1942, after a two-year sojourn in New York, Onslow Ford decamped with his wife to Mexico. There, he dispensed with painting personages and places (however abstractly or symbolically) in favor of compositions like *The News* (1945), in which matter and energy are depicted as Van Gogh-like swirls of colored dots and dashes.

The show ends with work made in the early 1950s, when, after moving to San Francisco, Onslow Ford made a final break with Surrealism. Luminous works on paper, they leave one wanting more. A full retrospective is not, as far as I know, in the works. But it should be.—*Anne Doran*

## Matt Magee, "New Paintings"

★★★★★

**Knoedler & Company**, through Nov 13 (see Uptown/Madison Avenue & vicinity)

Presenting a persuasive argument for the sublime nature of abstraction, Matt Magee offers two dozen nonrepresentational paintings on paper, and nearly as many minimal interpretations of life filtered through a Conceptual sieve on painted wood panels, in his first exhibition at Knoedler & Company. Twenty-four years since he earned an M.F.A. from Pratt Institute, Magee has continuously exhibited his intimate and poetic

works in cultural capitals, yet has remained under the art world's radar. Supremely confident in his artistic skills and keen in the consideration of the installation, Magee makes the gallery's Project Space his own.

A series of small works on paper, in which Magee repeatedly painted jovial dots and dashes in the grid of an Agnes Martin invitation card,

is the first work displayed—setting a Conceptual tone for the variously sized abstract paintings that rhythmically bounce around the next room. *Greentext*, the largest painting in the show at 72 by 48 inches, depicts 16 beautifully fluctuating horizontal lines that shimmy across a white background to whimsically reference Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves*, which the artist rediscovered while visiting his sister in London. Likewise, the smallest painting on view, *Little Canada*, which measures eight by ten inches and captures the funky shape of our northern neighbor's boundaries in pink paint

on a white field, was inspired by a sign for a suburb of Minneapolis that Magee spotted while visiting his aunt.

Throw reductive monochromes of airports, bar codes and naval vessels into Magee's painterly mix, and you get a vocabulary of abstract forms that's positively ready for prime time.—*Paul Laster*

