

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

John Lees: *Monk Stream*, 2007, oil on canvas, 16 by 8 inches; at Betty Cunningham.



JOHN LEES BETTY CUNNINGHAM

Looking at John Lees's thickly encrusted paintings, one has the sense that he wants the picture to establish its own autonomy, freed from any recognizable stroke of the hand. His works' physicality connects him especially to the art of Rouault, whom Lees cites as a source. Other influences come to mind, most especially the work of British painter Frank Auerbach; he and Lees share the practice of building an image over many sessions and much time. (Lees records the dates on the paintings themselves, which can take years before he considers them finished.) A few pieces actually began as his palettes, so that they contained a history even before the artist started to transform the surface. The show presented a relatively small repertoire of imagery—streams and ponds, bathtubs and a portrait or two—in works ranging in size from 5 by 7 inches to over 4 feet in length, most of them oils on canvas or wood.

In 1990, after living for years in New York City, Lees moved upstate and

now maintains a studio at the edge of the Catskills. In response to his rural surroundings, the artist has painted several works portraying bodies of water, such as the small stream that runs by his house. At 48½ by 251/2 inches, *Monk Stream* (2004-07) doesn't present an epic scale, but Lees captures an intensity in the white water that rises as a sinuous, vertical shape. *Ripples* (2000-07) is horizontally aligned and focuses on several overlapping swells of concentric circles in a river, with a few green trees dotting a distant hill. Like other paintings in the show, this work finely balances abstraction and representation.

Taken with jazz and film, Lees also possesses a sense of humor, seen in his funny, endearing portrait *Pompeian Porky* (2003-07). In this smallish painting (211/sinches square), Porky Pig's face, in raw white, is treated as roughly as the reddish background; the work looks like it has been covered with ash. With *Hera* (2002-07), Lees jumps quite easily from the silly to the sublime. It shows the wife of Zeus with an astonished expression, perhaps of catharsis; a red circle forms her open mouth, and her face is otherwise composed of white and red dots and splotches. The show demonstrated that Lees is capable of a wide range of effects, from lyric and humorous to mythic and forceful.

—Jonathan Goodman