

M A R G A R E T  
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 P R O J E C T S

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By David Cohen  
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By DAVID COHEN  
 William Steiger's factories, silos, cable cars, and Ferris wheels are clean, serene, and iconic. Bryan Hunt brings doll's house finesse to his legendary airships, a motif that also appealed to Mr. Steiger. And Julian Opie — the most mature of the "young" British artists — has found his niche at the blurry boundary between street signage and depiction. Works by all

**WILLIAM STEIGER: LAND: MARK, NEW PAINTINGS**  
*Margaret Thatcher Projects*

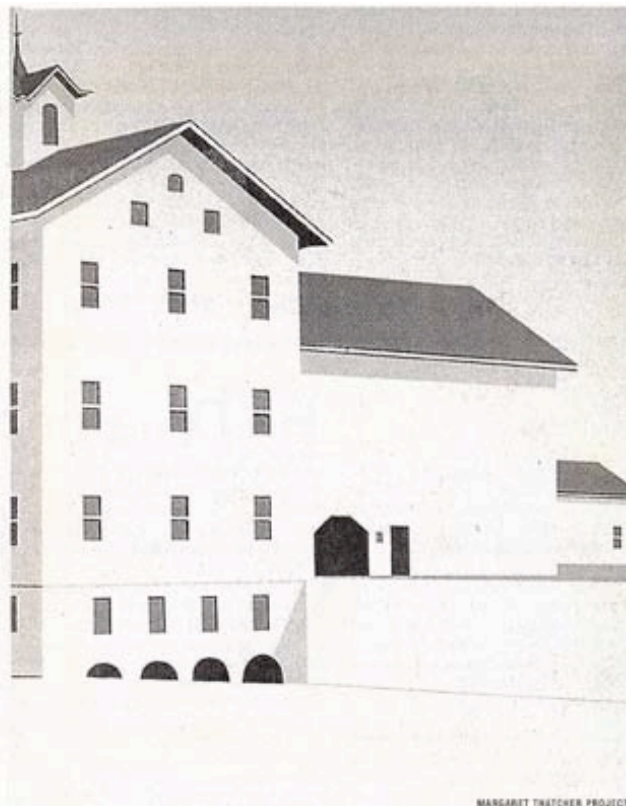
**BRYAN HUNT: AIRSHIPS**  
*Mitchell-Innes and Nash*

**JULIAN OPIE'S ANIMALS, BUILDINGS, CARS & PEOPLE**  
*City Hall Park*

three are to be seen currently around the city. Mr. Steiger has a show of new paintings at Margaret Thatcher, Mr. Hunt of vintage (1970s) blimps at Mitchell-Innes and Nash, and Mr. Opie has a long-term installation of works, staged by the Public Art Fund, at Lower Manhattan's City Hall Park.

All raise the question: What is the special lure of graphic design or model-maker's skill to artists? Why would fine artists allow any confusion of their activity with the craft of journeymen at the lower end of the creative social scale? One answer is that graphic design is at once pure and impure. Pure because of the simplicity, impersonality, and facility of sweet colors, clean lines, and efficient communication. Impure because of the frisson of high and low, a taste of forbidden fruit.

Mr. Steiger's style references both commercial design and fine artists who were themselves influenced by illustration. His most obvious forebear is Charles Sheeler, the American "Precisionist" of the 1930s; there are also shades of Charles Demuth and Ralston Crawford. Mr. Steiger's images are imbued with a nostalgia for the modernity of yesteryear. His rendering technique has nothing "cutting edge" about it: Masking tape and a Stanley knife seem to be the tools of trade. His odd combination of impersonality and the handmade explains the warmth of these seemingly facile works.



William Steiger, 'The Blue Mill' (2004).

This world he creates, which is flat, decorative, and rendered, could betoken alienation, a reduction of life to a sequence of signs. That certainly is the kind of semiotic menace Julian Opie likes to tap. Instead Mr. Steiger accesses the serene joy of a tourist brochure, of a Tintin cartoon.

Yet he has an acuity of observation as compelling as it is innocent. Economy, not reduction, is his clarion call. Despite the sweet artifice of his palette and prissy precision of his line, his top interest turns out to be supremely painterly: the evocation of space, with the inevitable, motor-reflex perceptual emotion that entails. Somehow his ex-

panses of white — perceptually neutral in intent — always seem sumptuous.

Within his streamlined means, Mr. Steiger's effects show themselves to be complex and subtle, all the while retaining the element of innocence that comes from illustrative technique. He revels in the tonal modulation of shadows; the audacious intervention of warm colors amid the steely cool blues and grays of a mill to denote distant landscape; the inner space of a distant cable car; the almost baroque rhythmic complexity of a Ferris wheel viewed at an oblique angle. His aerial view landscapes (from a serenely floating blimp, no doubt) discover the river bending

amidst a strict grid of fields, caught on the diagonal, a marriage of the geometric and the organic that serves as a metaphor of his own fusion of observation and artifice.

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Bryan Hunt's airships are a happy marriage of popular craft and art at its most effete: They fuse a love of Brancusi with the thrill of spying a model ship of your childhood on the top shelf of a thrift store. A few years ago, he made this marriage manifest with a blimp, turned vertically, mounted on a Brancusi-type pedestal. The current exhibition consists of seven of the first of Mr. Hunt's dirigibles, carved with a serene hand from wood (spruce and balsa) and covered with metallic leaves and silk papers.

Some of Mr. Hunt's earlier works have very different qualities, including almost expressionistic bronzes that depict water in arrested motion — or else, perhaps, rocks in accelerated erosion. His airships are in every sense more ethereal. Earlier, his concerns were more abstract and exploratory, and he permitted himself to split the ships in half out of formal curiosity. As he got going with the motif, though, they became more overtly depictive of the ships themselves.

A great deal of the effect, naturally, derives from their installation. Rather than suspending them by wires, he has them jutting from the walls. Jeff Koons would have found a way to box them in helium, one suspects, but in his crafting and display of his blimps, Mr. Hunt achieves an inspiring balance of the literal and the metaphorical.

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Julian Opie was a few years ahead of the young Turks at London's Goldsmiths College who formed the YBA ascendancy in the early 1990s. His work actually connects the younger neoconceptualists with a previous generation of "new sculptors," such as appropriationists Bill Woodrow and Tony Cragg.

A committed Duchampian, Mr. Opie proves that you can make an entire career out of the deconstruction of art. His earliest efforts included a jolly, Pop-influenced debunking of the notion of masterpieces, with skillfully rendered versions of van Goghs and Matisse's gaudily painted on metal "canvases" strewn on the floor. Then he got hooked on semiotics, making variously witty and soulless art from road signage, or Lego-like buildings.

His best series turned to the human form: faces and figures. Rendered as pristine signage on shaped cutouts, rectangular supports, or kind of internally-lit cubes, they made disconcertingly convincing if stylishly superficial portraits out of generic signage. His efforts at City Hall, on the other hand, are ponderous and patronizing — a scrappy, ill-considered assortment. He has various animals in cutout icons, a couple of portraits, a dollhouse cluster of skyscrapers.

The work represents an intrusion of the most ubiquitous urban phenomenon in a rare patch of downtown nature, inflicted on the unsuspecting in the name of intellectual superiority. It is such a caricature of public art gone wrong that one assumes that is its meaning.

*Steiger until November 20 (511 W. 25th Street, no. 404, between Tenth and Eleventh Avenues, 212-675-0222). Prices: \$1,500–\$10,000.*

*Hunt until December 11 (1018 Madison Avenue, between 78th and 79th Streets, 212-744-7400). Prices: The gallery declined to disclose its prices.*

*Opie until October 14, 2005.*