

James Nares

SELECTED PRESS

Multidisciplinary Artist Jamie Nares

Practicing her brushstroke

FANNY SINGER
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Nares, 68, photographed at her studio in Long Island City, Queens, on Oct. 6, 2021. Sean Donnola

In 1992, I started making paintings with one brushstroke. It seemed like there was enough going on within a single brushstroke to keep me interested. I wanted it to look blown on, like the pigment used for those hands in cave drawings. It was all about speed, touch, timing. It's difficult to be precise. When I first started doing these one-brushstroke paintings, if I didn't like what I'd done, I'd get down on my hands and knees with a can of mineral spirits and a bunch of rags and wipe it off. By the time I'd finished that, I'd lost the kind of muscle memory of what I was trying to do. And it's very important to the paintings that they be a transference of some accumulation of muscle memories from the body to the brush.

So, I was searching for a way to be able to wipe that slate clean but quickly. And I came up with this method where I prepared the canvas with a surface that was very smooth and tough. And if I don't like my brushstroke, which is most of the time, I can just squeegee it clean without losing that muscle memory of what my intentions are. The brushstroke itself gets made in a matter of seconds, even if I work on it all day or over a couple of days. It's interesting to think about how things have changed since 1992. It sounds almost trite or clever, but I've discovered why I create the paintings. Through making them, I've not only learned who I am, I've learned what's important to me as an artist.

My deepest being is contained within the brushstrokes — in a very unhidden way. It's all there. Nothing's added or subtracted; it just is what it is, complete with foibles or what have you. I've discovered that there's more of me showing in those single brushstrokes than I'd have cared to admit. I think my trans nature is very much there for all to see. The brushstrokes — they're strong and delicate at the same time. They're imprints of my body, transmitted through the hand or wrist, coming from my complete being, body and mind. When I revisit some of the older paintings, it seems like my truer nature is still there for all to see. And it's something quite pleasing for me to look back on now. It's like I knew myself better than I thought I did.

James Nares, an Artist Known for Mapping New York's Changing Landscape, Is Now Navigating a Deeply Personal Transition of His Own

The artist is currently the subject of a retrospective at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

MAX LAKIN
JULY 15, 2019



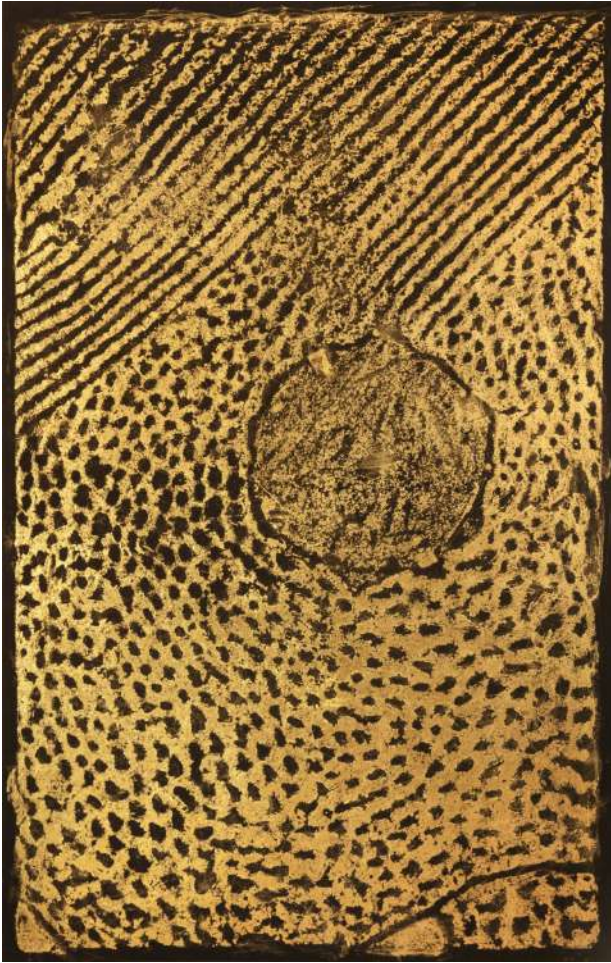
James Nares. Photo by Diego Flores.

The late, great writer Glenn O'Brien once said that James Nares might sound a bit British, but he's a New Yorker at heart. Nares does speak with a latent, languid London accent, but there are few artists whose work has embodied the thrum of New York like his.

You can make the argument, as Nares has, that the defining characteristic of the city is its streets. Much of the artist's work has located itself there, specifically the street surface, the textural layer of the concrete and asphalt and all the visual information caked into it. Since his arrival to New York in 1974, the street has been Nares's great protagonist and, in the intervening years, he has spent a lot of time looking down.

"The surface of the city, it's just something that never goes away," Nares said. "It's a history of sorts. And it's a less

protected history, less cared for. I guess that appeals to me in a way. It's pretty democratic. It's walked on. It's used. It wears its history on its face, endless layers upon layers of road paint."



James Nares, *Prince II* (2018). Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin.

The subject matter of Nares's newest body of work, the granite paving stones that make up lower Manhattan's sidewalks, would be familiar to anyone who's ambled through Soho or gawked from the curb as another glassine condo rises over Tribeca. Yet in "Monuments," Nares's recent show at Kasmin gallery in New York, the sidewalk is made new, even alien. Over the last year, he has made wax frottage rubbings of the oldest examples, some upwards of 200 years old, pressing the impressions with 22-carat gold leaf. Laid by immigrant artisans and mottled with traction-giving grooves and gouges, the paving stones can resemble brutal abstractions or primitive runes. Gilded and hoisted onto the wall, they're strange and sweet monoliths, tributes to the anonymous workers whose hands still shape the contours of the city. It's a touching tribute to the city and its capacity to fold time.

In a way, "Monuments" is a corrective, an acknowledgement of the people who contributed to the city's texture in a tangible way, and, as a byproduct of the sour political tenor of the moment, a rather pointed statement about the immigrant labor from which this country benefits. Like gravestone rubbings, they're a devotional act. "We could do two big ones in a day," Nares said of the process. "It's amazing how tiring it was, scrubbing the sidewalk. I joked that we were paying homage to our ancestors, the guys who made the marks in the first place, just a group of us bullshitting around, talking about this and that, which is just how I imagine them doing it," he said. "I imagine them as masons from different countries who were mixing and making these things together. It's my imagination which is

the most important thing at that point. I'm close enough, I think, to the truth, whatever it is. Intimate touches, that's all we have."

For an artist so consumed with gesture and mark making, "Monuments" is different. The works are chiefly the marks made by someone else, anointed. They're less about process than about seeing. They're a gift, really, one that allows us to see ourselves. "I'm not a great sentimentalist," Nares said. "I'm a realist when it comes to New York. I was reading Edith Wharton's letters, and she was saying, 'Goddamnit, I don't recognize the neighborhood I grew up in.' But I like to acknowledge those things, and it does make me sad when those things are obliterated. We do do it very callously. I think possibly having a European background enables me to attach myself to the importance of things made a long time ago—an awareness of history that isn't as endemic to this country. But it's a conundrum, because that's also what makes things so great here, the ability to make it new, and have another one, the next model."

To a large degree, the works are also monuments to Nares's time in New York. It's perhaps fitting that this happens to be a time of personal transition for Nares. "Monuments" accompanies a retrospective, the artist's first, at the Milwaukee Art Museum, titled "Moves," on view now through October 6. And he's preparing to move from his studio of 10 years in West Chelsea, where the rent is set to double (a parallel New York narrative), to a new space in Long Island City, Queens.

Much more than that, Nares is embracing a side of himself personally that he has to this point in his life repressed. In May, at a lunch at Kasmin, Nares publicly presented as a woman for the first time, and with artist friends like Walter Robinson and Julian Schnabel looking on, spoke rawly about the pain he had been suppressing for so long. (Nares still uses male pronouns and his given name professionally.)



Installation view of "James Nares: Monuments." Photo by Diego Flores, courtesy of Kasmin.

"It's coincidental that these things have all sort of come to a head at the same time," Nares said at his studio a few weeks later. "It's been a large and basically unacknowledged part of me for as long as I can remember, and I think it's in many ways the cause of much suffering in my life, addictions and all that stuff. I mean, I'm an addict because I'm an addict, I don't believe any circumstance made me an addict, but if there were things that I could tie to the kind of

suffering that I was trying to mitigate with my substance abuse, this would certainly top the list. But I've neglected it for all my life, though that's not quite true, when I was living in London, my very first show in a gallery was pictures of myself presenting the way I do now. It was just something I did and never did publicly again."

Curated by Marcelle Polodnik, the Milwaukee Museum retrospective cycles through the movements of Nares's career, beginning with the early, no-budget Super 8 films he made in the mid-1970s, like *Block*, a stuttering shot of a hand tracing the length of a Manhattan city block (incidentally, the southern wall of the Church Street post office, the only structure on the northern perimeter of the World Trade Center to remain in tact after September 11), and *Pendulum*, in which Nares swings a water-filled copper sphere—an ersatz wrecking ball—through a pre-gentrified Tribeca and films it slicing through the air; to his road paint canvases, which he made using a modified pavement line-striping machine; into his calligraphic, single brushstroke paintings, sinuous whorls of cadmium and cobalt and vermilion, which, because of the physicality involved—he made some made by suspending himself in a rig above the canvas—are as much body art as anything. "Those paintings have a kind of sensual quality, which my work hadn't expressed before in quite the same way," Nares said. "There's a strong representation of my feminine aspect. They're very sensual."



James Nares, *Douglas*, still (2015). Photo courtesy of the artist and Kasmin.

At just 66 years old, Nares hadn't really been in a retrospective frame of mind, even as Polodnik had periodically broached the idea over the past six years, but installing the Milwaukee show proved to be a cathartic experience. "It was exciting to see some old friends," he said of his early works. "The threads are all up here, you know. But I realize that the threads have never been made clear before. Even my kids were saying, 'Wow, papa, you made this?' People

hadn't seen the work and hadn't had the connective tissue put in front of them, the thread unraveled."

The Milwaukee show presents an uncanny sense of overlap, the past and present looping into one another. *Street* Nares's 2012 film, in which he trawled Manhattan in a car fixed with a Phantom Flex high-speed camera and slowed the gathered footage to an immaculate, yearning 61 minutes, has echoes of the Super 8 films that made New York's street level strange, but also the work to come, like *Portraits*, tightly cropped short films of individual sitters shot similarly, so that every muscle ripple reverberates like an earthquake.

Seeing *Street* and *Pendulum* in the same space illuminates their shared feeling, an illusion of controlled chaos that gives way to an ecstatic reverie. *Pendulum* inhabits the obliteration of the city in the '70s, it's kinetic destruction, but also its capacity to incubate art, and, by extension, a future. So too does *Street* trace a particular moment of the life cycle of the city. As ebullient as it is, there's the understanding that this version of New York is not long for the world, and that the people sliding through it won't necessarily be here to see the next. In it, and in all of it, there is a birth and death.

After raising a family, and a number of marriages, Nares has gradually grown more comfortable presenting publicly as a woman. "I've been more open about it. There are all these corny expressions—'live my truth'—I don't think what I was living before was untrue, but I've reached a point in my life—I have three beautiful daughters and a lovely stepson who I adore, and I'm 66 today — it's time to just give myself a break. I had told my kids, and they were all immediately supportive, which was amazing. And [my daughter] Zarina asked me if she could see some photos of myself, and she said, 'Oh, these are great, can I post one on Instagram,' and I said, 'yeah, sure,' forgetting for a crucial moment the power of social media. The next thing I knew I was getting phone calls from everybody. I sort of went from 0 to 100 overnight, and so the cat was out of the bag, and it was like, well, you know, maybe that's better."

The changes in Nares's life are an evolving process. "There was always this terrible fear, until very recently," he said. "Something shifted, and it shifted quite quickly. I've tried dodging it and I've tried mostly hiding it, and now there's a great feeling of congruence between the way I am and the way I show myself. I'm also, I'm realizing, part of what allowed it to happen. My generation of artists sowed many seeds that have come to fruit with these younger generations. If I think back to, like, Mapplethorpe, Jack Smith, I was part of the work that was done, even if I wasn't addressing it directly, I was there, I was supportive, and in a way I'm reaping that."

Because Nares's work touches a handful of art historical movements, from Minimalism to No Wave, with a few stops in between, categorization is, fittingly, perhaps not the most useful effort. "I was aware of those things, those divisions and subgroups," Nares said. "And I understand why those divisions appear, because that's sort of the natural way people reduce or define or pare things down to a readily understandable tag so you can reference it in conversation or whatever, and I understand also how people get pissed off, you know, 'I'm not a pop artist!' or whatever it is. At this point, I don't know what I am. The categories did kind of break down in the last I-don't-know-how-many years, there has been a rupture, which appeals to me, because I'm just that way myself. I have too many interests. It all just percolates in my mind and every now and then something floats to the top, and that's what I do."

James Nares: *Monuments*

JASON ROSENFELD

JUNE 2019



James Nares, *Greenwich I*, 2018. 22k gold leaf on Evolon, 132 3/4 x 55 3/4 x 2 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

As a newbie to New York, I was told by many people not to be caught looking up—that if I did, I would appear a tourist. Poor advice. Not to look up is to miss the starry and thrusting energy that is one key to the city’s distinctiveness. But the implication was that there was indeed something to see up there. No one ever cautioned me not to look down at my feet. What could possibly be worth staring at on the ground? James Nares’s new show abjures the winged vision of the skyline that has dominated imagery of the city in art and film since the days of Stieglitz, Strand, O’Keeffe, and Sheeler, in favor of a revealing engagement with the very stones beneath our shoes.

Nares moved from London to Manhattan in 1974, and has used the city ever since as his stage set and subject, looking at it from all directions while translating his motive yet penetrative gaze via many artistic mediums. His present series of formidable paintings tower over visitors on the high walls of Kasmin’s airy new gallery space, but

they are the successful products of a concerted effort to look down. To notice the particularities of the pavement beneath one's feet. To render those surfaces in a remarkably tactile manner. To refer to bodies and histories in a way that Nares's art always has.



James Nares, *Bowery*, 2019. 22k gold leaf on Evolon, 91 x 58 1/4 x 2 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Nares has had his studio in Chelsea since the mid-1990s, but in many ways his practice never left the downtown byways of his early career, when he shot footage and worked in and around studios on Jay Street, in Tribeca, and then Bond Street, in the Village. These productions are related to the contemporary films of Americans Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra, the experiential non-narrative work of Robert Smithson and Ernie Gehr, and the landscape-based body films and imagery of Nares's English contemporary, Andy Goldsworthy. In films such as *Roof* (1975), *Pendulum* (1976), and *Ramp* (1976), Nares treated a nearly-always deserted-looking downtown as his open studio, shooting himself and various implements in motion amidst the soot and Belgian block and brick of Manhattan's earliest industrial center. The present series of eight paintings from 2018 and 2019 were produced in those well-trod environs, and consists of paintings made by rubbing paving stones on sidewalks in and around SoHo and gilding their resulting surface patterns.

Nares's opulent use of 22-carat gold leaf may at first seem a concession to the sanitizing Hudson Yards-ing of Manhattan. But the gritty act of getting on one's hands and knees on well-worn pavement is not performed in celebration of yet another NYC renaissance. Instead it acknowledges the debt owed to generations of speculative working-class people who came through the city's various points of entry to make the United States their home. It

refers to the general gold rush that was America for so many immigrants, and the hands and feet that contributed to the nation's rise, appropriately, in the Gilded Age. The present works were made by laying out large rolls of synthetic Evolon paper prepared with multiple coats of black acrylic paints, and then rubbing with wax over the surfaces of individually selected granite stones first laid as sidewalks around 150 years ago. There are links to Max Ernst's *frottage* technique and traditional rubbings of grave markers and brass church monuments. The wax picks up the nooks and crannies of patterns that laborers chiseled into the stones so that pedestrians would not slip on them in the rain. Back in the studio, Nares and his assistants applied gold leaf to the surface, which adheres only to the waxed patterns. As the artists notes in a video on the Kasmin website, a work's "size is dictated by the size of the stones." Titles denote find sites, as in *Light I*, speckled like the hide of a big cat, or *Lafayette VII*, with its wavy arabesque patterns as distinctive as fingerprints. The marvelous *Greenwich I*, notched at the top right, resembles an ancient Akkadian stele and features seven alternating bands of horizontal and vertical striations, making a connection to hatching in drawing. In *Bowery*, there is a distinctive, square stop-valve cover with "WATER" lettered across it in a diagonal rising to the right. *Wooster* is shaped like the prow of a boat or a jutting Ellsworth Kelly canvas. In all the works the gilding adheres to the elements that are in relief: as in a woodcut, these are the raised sections untouched by the laborers, whose physically hammered and chiseled gouges and grooves remain inky and anonymous.

The title of the show, *Monuments*, plays off the idea of commemorating these laborers who built a habitable city out of the most unyielding materials. It also references the gilded monuments that proliferate in the metropolis and celebrate individuals or personifications, such as Augustus Saint-Gaudens's gold-encrusted General William Tecumseh Sherman and Nike, or Attilio Piccirilli's sparking Columbia and her three hippocampi atop the Maine Monument, at their respective southern corners of Central Park. But the title also plays with the word "monumental," and the fact that these are full-scale rubbings of recumbent megaliths that dwarf visitors to Kasmin's studioMDA-designed cube of a gallery on West 27th Street. They also makes me think of Michael Heizer's gargantuan *Negative Megalith #5* (1998) at Dia:Beacon—that massive over-15-foot tall upright chunk of diorite encased in a steel-lined wall niche.

Rocks rock. Nares, former guitarist for the No Wave band The Contortions, is well aware of this. At the same time, the paintings respond beautifully to changing light conditions in the gallery. When the lights are off, the pictures pulse with the waxing and waning of the sun as it vies with clouds, a changeability inherent in Warhol's *Diamond Dust* works that Nares also explored in his "Road Paint" (2013) and "Runway" (2016) series. With the lights on, the paintings' surfaces shimmer as brilliantly as Walter De Maria's *Broken Kilometer* (1979) on Wooster Street under its halide stadium lights. More historically, there is a sense of communication with the spectral divinity in late Gothic gold-backed panel paintings, from Byzantium to Fra Angelico, which created a sense of heaven amidst the changing and flickering light of oil lamps and candles inside churches.

As an artist constantly seeking new perspectives on the prosaic, whether in his hypnotic and absorbing panoramic film *Street* (2011) or in the wandering, topsy-turvy visuals of Chelsea as filmed in *Globe* (2007), *Monuments* reprises elements familiar from Nares's whole career: an emphasis on gesture or gestures translated, motive mark-making as a practice, time-based media, an obsession with monumentality and history perhaps first inculcated in his "Egypt" drawings of 1983, and technical experimentation. A major retrospective of his work, *Nares: Moves*, has just opened at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Shamefully, it does not have a New York venue. It is the equivalent of holding a Lou Reed tribute concert only in Minneapolis. Nares gets New York, the most pedestrian-friendly metropolis in the world. He proves it with every aesthetic move he has ever made, no less than asking us to think about the stones beneath our feet.

ARTFORUM

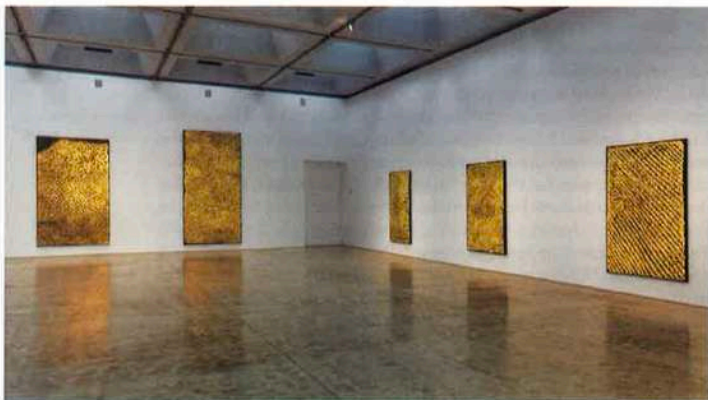
James Nares

DONALD KUSPIT
SEPTEMBER 2019

James Nares KASMIN GALLERY

James Nares's eight ingenious and materially intriguing paintings at Kasmin Gallery—made from twenty-two-karat gold leaf applied to a ground of black Evolon, a microfilament textile—created a richly existential space with the most elemental of contrasts: light and dark, symbolizing life and death. The surfaces of his abstractions—stippled or covered with striations that vaguely resemble the hides of cheetahs, tigers, and other exotic cats—are resolutely flat, in the grand modernist tradition. Yet they are profoundly expressive, rich with personal and social meaning, as evidenced by the pictures' titles, such as *Greenwich I*, 2018; *Lafayette VI* and *Lafayette VII*, both 2019; *Laight I*, 2018; and *Wooster*, 2019—which cite streets in Lower Manhattan, where the artist has lived for decades. He has strolled these sidewalks, some of which are centuries old, again and again. They possess an extraordinary presence for him (the exhibition was called "Monuments," after all), as emblems of the workers who made them so many years ago.

View of "James Nares," 2019. Photo: Christopher Slach.



Nares started these paintings by making wax rubbings of those sidewalks, large slabs of granite inscribed with sundry designs—aesthetically sophisticated patterns born out of practical necessity—to keep passersby from slipping on them. The stones were cut into by "unknown souls whose touch still lingers," according to Nares. He identifies with these laborers and suggests that they, too, were artists—modern artists, no less, by reason of their spontaneity, gesturalism,

improvisation. Dare one say creative freedom? Yet Nares seems to be hoping, however unconsciously, that his mark-making, his creative carvings, will exist as long as theirs. The question ostensibly haunting Nares, then, is whether his paintings will also withstand the ages and immortalize him as he immortalizes the workers. I imagine they will. For one thing, gold, physically and metaphysically, is as durable as granite—the stuff of gods, kings, immortality. And what about the life span of Evolon? If it's anything close to that of canvas, the material could stay strong for hundreds of years (and it appears to be a very high-tech fabric, so it'll likely outlast us all). But people stroll the old sidewalks knowing little or nothing about who created them. Could the same indifference befall Nares's pieces?

There is a lightly sentimental thread that runs through Nares's subtly eloquent high art. The exhibition's works are profoundly humanist, offering a welcome reprieve from modernist purity that goes against the critic Clement Greenberg's rather contemptuous dismissal of the "all too human," as he called it. Take *Lafayette VII*, 2019, a scintillating field of liquescent, serpentine forms that are as steadfastly and rigorously optical as they are unequivocally physical, sensual. They subliminally reintegrate unconscious feeling—a quality implicit in the explicitly material sidewalk. The process makes one think of Kandinsky when, in his dubious Solomonic wisdom, he dismissed Monet's haystack—"the object," as he said—due to its color. The notion speaks more to Kandinsky's elitist spiritual concerns than to banal haystacks or, for that matter, everyday sidewalks. Kandinsky's art is indifferent to time. But Nares's works are memento mori that leave their traces on us.

—Donald Kuspit

How Artist James Nares Makes His Living Portraits

MAX LAKIN
MARCH 4, 2016



Courtesy of James Nares.

Visitors to James Nares's studio in far west Chelsea find all manner of jerry-rigged implements: a wall of fantastical feathered brushes; a modified highway-line-stripping machine, HAZMAT orange and with a propane tank fixed to one end; and a new, yet-christened harness system suspended from the ceiling, one that the artist will use to negotiate his massive brushstroke paintings.

Along the wall of casement windows at the far end is a very specific portrait studio, home to perhaps the most impressive rig in Nares's formidable quiver. There, a dolly mounted to a sizable, craning arm, counterweighted by an old Gold's Gym barbell discus, cradles a very specific camera, a compact iteration of an industrial camera nicknamed "The Troubleshooter."

An exhibition showcasing the results of portraits taken with the Rube Goldberg-esque contraption, "James Nares: Portraits," opens this week a block away at Paul Kasmin Gallery. It finds Nares's friends, family, and associates—people like Glenn O'Brien, Hilton Als, Jim Jarmusch, and Amy Taubin—rendered in startlingly high-resolution, supremely intimate video. Viewed on the near-lifesized monitors, they evoke the old Renaissance masters Bruegel or Van Eyck, if Bruegel or Van Eyck filmed at 600 frames per second.

The original camera, which Nares described as looking “like a sort of Russian camera from the 1950s or something,” was made to diagnose hiccups in unruly factory machinery, catching things that moved too fast for the eye. “But it did the most beautiful images, which looked as though they were woven into a fabric. . . . It had something extra, a very painterly quality.”

Nares’s filmed portraits slow down natural movement so that, at times, you have to remind yourself what exactly you’re looking at: musculature rippling under a cheek, brackish pools of eyes, the many varied lines and crags that make up or are mistaken for personality. It’s wild and weird and more than a bit thrilling, what Nares has done, offering the opportunity to really look at someone, which is not a small thing.



Courtesy of James Nares.

“I found that the camera as I use it is a powerful instrument, and I could abuse it,” Nares said. “I could chose to show the parts that make people look stupid, or funny, which everybody does. I steered away from anything like that, and looked for the moments that are kind of human, and the kind of thing that anyone could identify with, because you’re looking at yourself inevitably when you look at anybody else.”

“Portraits” owes a debt to Andy Warhol’s “Screen Tests,” the silent film portraits of Factory denizens and art-world habitués. But where Warhol’s portraits were stark, hard-lit affairs, Nares’s have the effect of a sentient Velázquez: warm, oddly soothing, and slightly unnerving; should you happen to turn your back to one, you might feel as though you’re being a bit rude.

“He was much tougher on his sitters,” Nares said of Warhol. “He would say, ‘Keep your eyes open. It’s going to run for three minutes,’ and he would walk off. I wasn’t testing anybody; I was just trying to see the best in them.”

It’s not his first experiment with high-speed cameras. For his 2011 film, *Street*, he fit a Phantom Flex—usually reserved for shooting things like hummingbirds and speeding bullets—into an S.U.V. and trawled the streets of Manhattan, slowing and weaving a collected three minutes of footage into a 61-minute tableau of kinetic humanism.

“It was important to me that these should be silent,” Nares said of the exhibit. “I was always a little equivocal about the sound on *Street*, but I love it, so my equivocation falls away quite easily. I did think of putting a directional speaker above each one and having something but it just seemed like that’s not what—this is about looking. These are about looking.”

“James might sound a bit British, but he’s a New Yorker,” O’Brien said. “He’s very concerned with experiment, and testing limits, pushing the envelope of perception. It didn’t surprise me that he would do something like this, to show the kind of hidden side, another dimension that’s right in front of our faces every day but that’s out of our perception.”

The idea of looking is a particularly New York obsession—so much so that it can feel like most public spaces have been expressly designed for this purpose. When you stack so many people on top of one another in their light-starved micro-units, simply walking around the block counts as theater, which is one of the things that made Street so evocative. In a city that raises people-watching to a high art, the act of slowing this procession down, forestalling mortality itself, approaches transcendence.

Nares’s preoccupations with extending the moment stretches back even further. Many of his films, such as *Pendulum*, in which he swings a concrete ball from a footbridge and films it slicing through the Tribeca air (there was a little more leeway in Tribeca in 1976), fix upon physical movement, prodding at the limits of human control.

His calligraphic, single brushstroke paintings, for which he received much acclaim and an invitation from Coach to splash them across its leather totes, do this, too. They’re immensely physical, yet seem to arrest the very idea of motion, as though the natural progression of life is suspended within their canvases.

“Portraits” is a natural expansion on this theme. “By altering time, that comes right out of *Street*, I think,” said O’Brien. “It’s almost that his subjects’ thoughts become more visible. It just opens up a whole new way of watching the human face.”

“He’s always been doing that,” said Jarmusch, who, like O’Brien, has known Nares since the late 1970s. “The interest in movement comes from the very beginning, the idea of something moving through space and time, how things change and vary themselves or are varied. It’s somehow ingrained in all his work.

“Once I ran into him and he was filming his hand, walking along St. Patrick’s on Mulberry, rubbing his hand along that brick wall. Then I saw the film, and it was outstanding. What a creature. I’ve learned stuff from watching that guy work for as long as I’ve know him.”

Born in London, Nares came to New York in 1974 and quickly fell into the city’s downtown demimonde. He helped found the artists’ group Colab, which counted the likes of Charlie Ahearn and Jenny Holzer as members, played guitar and provided vocals in the No Wave band James Chance and the Contortions and with Jarmusch in the Del-Byzanteens, and made films like *Rome ’78*, a raw, Super 8 retelling of Caligula set in an East Village apartment starring Lydia Lunch and Patti Astor.

“One of the things I found with *Street* was that as much as I was revealing things that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye, I was also creating things that weren’t there,” Nares said. “I had this shot of this guy in Chinatown walking down the street with his head to the ground, and he’s walking along and he looks like it’s the end of his

world, really depressed. But then in real time he's just making sure his shoelace is tied. So there's a distortion both ways."

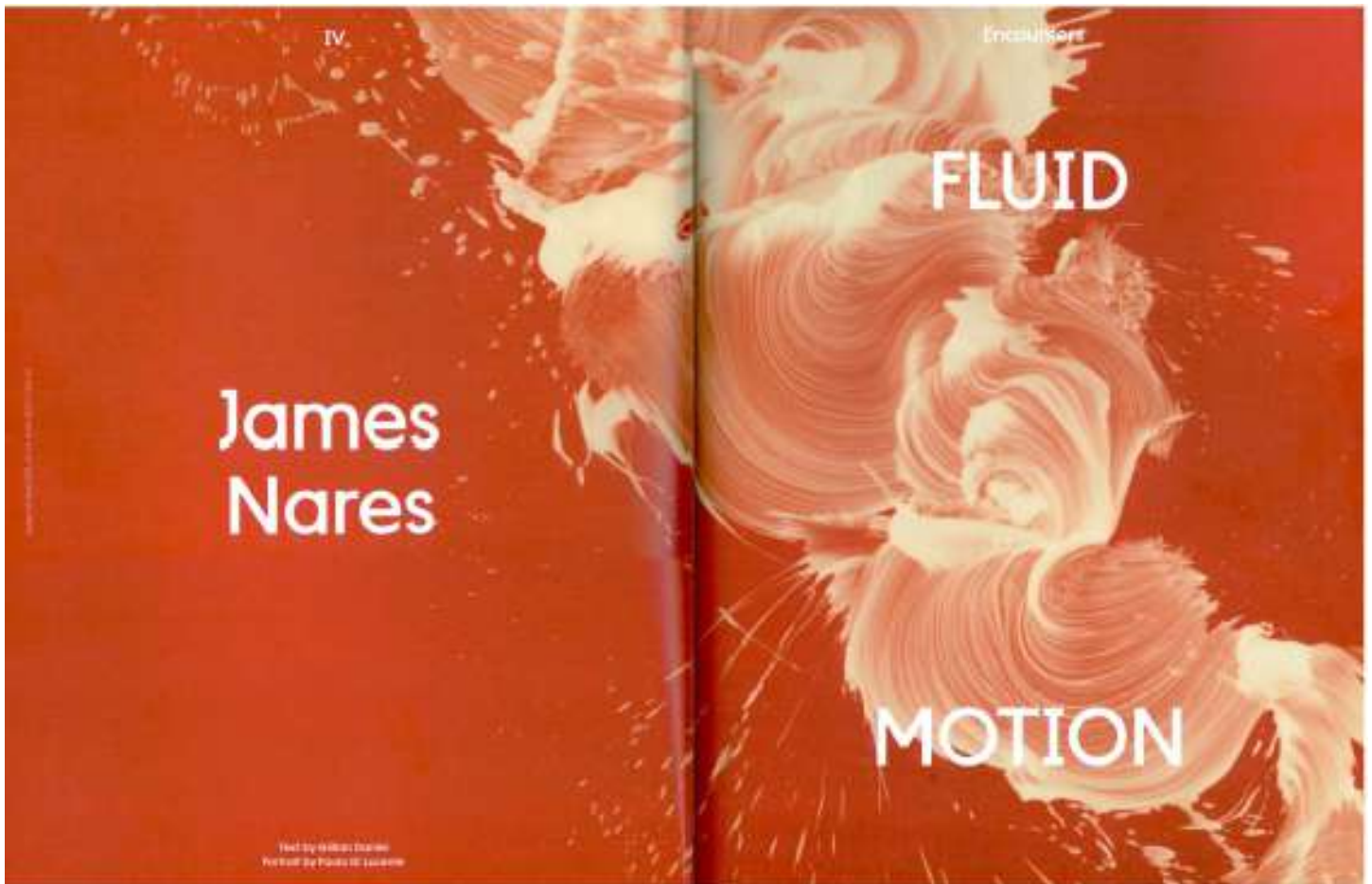
In "Portraits" these self-contained narratives emerge again, stories which may or may not be the product of the viewer. It's like: Who's looking at whom?

"You see a film like *Street*, that's heightening your ability to observe things by slowing them down," said Jarmusch. "You have no choice but to see things like an alien. He's got a very particular way of looking at the world."

ELEPHANT

James Nares: Fluid Motion

GILLIAN DANIEL
SPRING 2014



Founding Colab member James Nares talks to Gillian Daniel about his need to build his own brushes and the ideas behind his recent film *Street*, which formed the centrepiece of an exhibition he curated at the Met in New York last year.



James Nares points to a wall in his studio where his trademark handmade brushes hang. Over the past few years, the New York artist has mainly been working on a series of large paintings. Each features a single, bold stroke that dances energetically across the canvas. Nares started making his own brushes around 1982. 'You work out something on a small scale when it's still in its initial idea stages but when you translate that into something larger, everything becomes different. You can't just upscale things. I was always fascinated with brushstrokes, with the information that can be contained within a single brushstroke,' he explains. 'I remember standing in front of a Rembrandt in the Uffizi Gallery when I was about 15 and getting very excited by the way he had painted the collar of the jacket with wonderful big brushstrokes. I was gesticulating so wildly in front of the painting that the guard asked me to leave!'

Why did his interest with brushstrokes lead him to create his own brushes, when there are so many varieties that you can simply buy? 'I think I went through the natural process that every artist goes through in

life and in their work,' he explains, 'where they slowly strip away the things that are less interesting or unique to them until they end up with something that is truly theirs. In my paintings, I found that the brushstrokes slowly became the central focus of my work and then they became the only focus. I figured I wanted to make a painting in an instant, or as close to an instant as possible, in the way a photograph is made. My paintings reference photography, not in terms of visual reality, but in terms of a temporal one. I want an immediacy to the painting that is like a photograph. And I found that I somehow couldn't quite get that with the store-bought brushes. Something was missing.'

I wonder if he begins with an idea of the kind of stroke he wants to make before building a brush to suit his purposes, or if he experiments with different brushes and just sees how the results unfold. 'It's a little bit of both,' he replies. 'I usually have an idea of what I want to do and an idea of what each brush can do. I make them out of just about anything I can, but usually I use synthetic bristles while playing around with the handles. Those are



made with anything from a fencer's foil or a fishing rod or an old brush handle. I know that a particular brush will be able to do a particular thing so I can choose that one, or I can find that I don't have the brush to do the thing I want to do so I have to make it. Sometimes I'll make a brush and it will only be a couple of years before I get around to finding the right purpose for it. The brushes are like an ongoing cottage industry around here. I am constantly reconfiguring them and remaking them to get them just the way I want them.' He pauses. 'They're like the characters in the ongoing drama of my life. I haven't found the ideal combination of filament and handle and bristle. It evades me. But one day I will prevail, I think.'

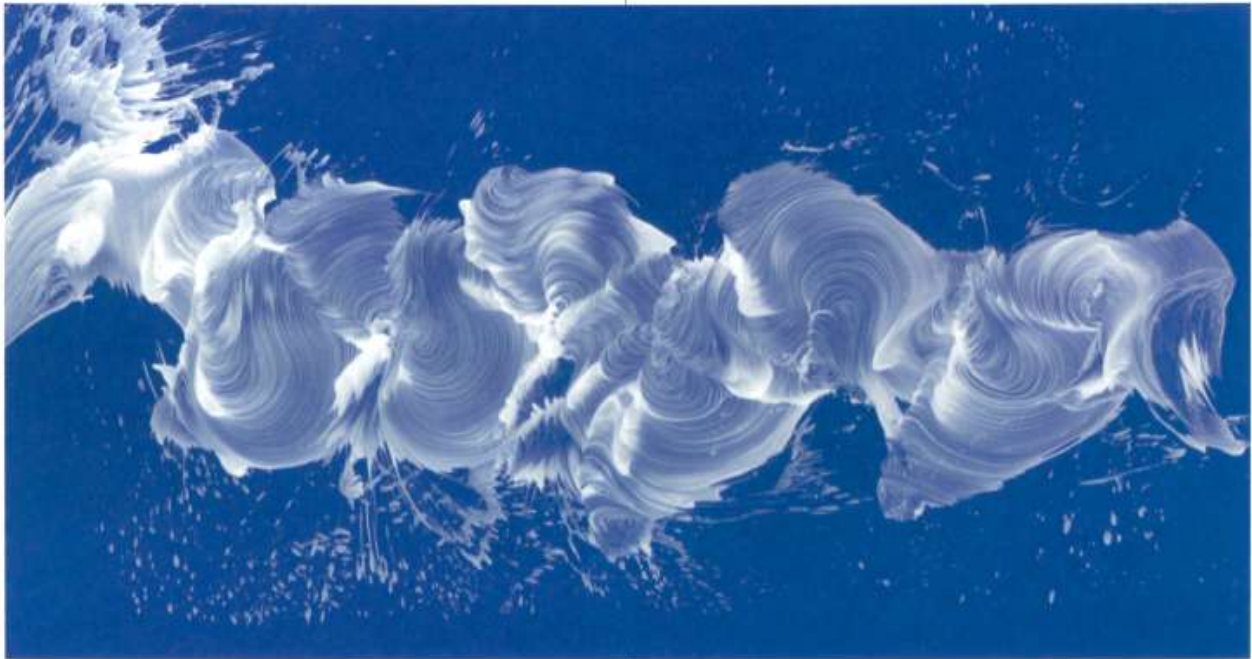
It is the dualities inherent in Nares's bold strokes that make the paintings so compelling. While he strives for immediacy through the single brushstrokes, there is a tension in the trial-and-error way he works. If the stroke is not what he is looking for, he paints over it and starts from scratch. Thus control and spontaneity coexist in his paintings. The strokes have an impulsive, raw quality. But there is also a sense of careful choreography. Nares comments: 'I like that you pick up on this because duality is in many ways the central ingredient to the painting. These tensions must exist in some kind of harmony with each other for the painting to work. I am constantly rid-

ing that thin divide between intention and spontaneity. That is what defines the painting in many ways. It's not expressionless in the sense that it is not unfiltered or undesigned.'

Critics have responded differently to Nares's unique style of painting. Because of his apparently purely gestural brushwork, some have called him the last of the Action Painters. Others focus on the calligraphic quality of the strokes, linking his practice to the ink-painting traditions of the East. Still others have suggested ties to the maverick figure of Roy Lichtenstein, who also created a series of brushstroke paintings, which combined his signature Pop Art-style gridded dots with the free strokes of the Abstract Expressionists in a gesture of rejection through mimicry. There are those who see a similar type of parodying in Nares's painting, which could be described as carefully planned Abstract Expressionism.

'I think it's all and none,' Nares comments. 'People have said so many different things over the years about my work. But in some ways I liken my brushes to a musical instrument. You are aware of what you are doing when you are a pianist or a guitar player but you never think about what your fingers are actually doing. There's the same kind of familiarity for me with the tool so I can play it without watching what I'm doing too closely.'

**You know, the brushstrokes, for me they're
almost proof of my existence.**



Signal, 2018, oil on canvas, 140 x 254.5 cm,
courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York



Stills from *Street*, 2011, HDV, 61 minutes, edition of 6, courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery



It's like my work and my life is one long line and my works are little narratives

After making these brushstroke paintings for a long time, in 2012 Nares made a film – *Street* – which features panning shots of New York's busy streets, dramatically slowed down until they hover somewhere in between real time and the frozen moment of a photograph. Why did he want to make this film? '*Street* relates to my brushstrokes in the way that it is a very linear film,' he says. 'The camera is moving in one line constantly and at a constant speed. I use a high-speed camera to take small fragments of time and extend it so that you can see things happen that you can't see with the naked eye. The paintings do the same thing. They show you the moment of conception that you would miss with the naked eye. I like that my work is linear. I feel that they all somehow connect. It's like my work and my life is one long line and my works are little narratives. They have a beginning and an end and something happens in between.' Indeed, looking at Nares's extensive oeuvre, even in his earliest works such as the untitled film that he made in the 1970s of a wrecking ball slowly demolishing a building in TriBeCa, there is a sense of a constant unfolding. In both his brushstroke paintings and his road paintings, a stroke created in a few seconds is taken and suspended in perpetuity. In *Street*, there is a fluid unravelling of ordinary moments. I say this to Nares. He's pleased. 'Unravelling,' he says. 'I love that word. That is the perfect word to use in connection with all my works.'

'After I finished *Street* I felt as though I had finally done something that defined who I am in a way that nothing else had,' says Nares. 'It had so many elements of what interests me but also something new and different in that it was very easy. It wasn't easy to make – no, that's not what I'm saying. But I made it with an ease that I have tried but not quite succeeded to do with everything, a kind of effortlessness I have always searched for. It happened in a very organic way. Yet that film has connected with more people in more ways than anything I have ever done... *Street* is a series of little vignettes, a collection of little narratives. I did end up making a film with a very narrative quality but a strange one because you bring your own story to each section. People have said very nice things about the film. I particularly loved what Ken Johnson [the *New York Times* art critic] said about it being "Whitmanesque". That really was what made me feel like I'd done something that people could find

as important as I found it. People told me they were moved by watching the film. Well... That's pretty cool! I wasn't trying to move, I was just presenting things that happened. I just assembled it and it's so nice that people like you feel that it is an epic. You know, I found the original proposal I'd written maybe three years before for a grant that I never got because I said I wanted to make a movie that would be seen a hundred years from now and they just didn't get it. I said I'm not looking to shoot moments of high drama, like muggings. I just wanted to see the drama in small things that happen all the time everywhere, the little dramas that become big along the way. I like that in *Street* you're always hanging on. You get the feeling that something is coming. It feels really good to be able to make a film that is one hour long and in super-slow motion and people have watched it and were compelled by it. I've seen so many people, young and old, hanging on to every moment and it's kind of amazing to me. I see them looking all over the frame, looking everywhere the whole time and bringing their own speed to the slowness of what's happening. I see it all unravelling, as you say, and that to me is great.'

Since completing *Street*, Nares has recently created a series of paintings that feature a different type of brushstroke. Using a road-marking paint machine that he calls The Little Dragon, Nares lays down strips of paint onto expanses of canvas and sprinkles glass beads onto them. 'These paintings are something I wanted to do for years,' he explains. 'I would see those guys in the summer putting down road paint and I would think, God, what a great machine! I'd love to use one of those! In the last few years, especially after *Street*, I've been allowing myself to just enjoy making different things again. I feel like now that I've defined my interests with the brushstroke paintings, it's freed me to start looking outwards again. I refer to the road paintings instinctively as strokes because there is a similar thought process that goes behind the laying down of a line. It's a much more cumbersome and mechanical process but it's still deciding what kind of line to make, how fast to go and how much paint to put down. I'm exploring the same kinds of decisions that I have been using for years in my paintings.'

Nares began making art at a very early age. 'I was lucky, my parents always encouraged me, even when I stole my stepdad's pipe out of his drawer and glued it to a piece of

Downshift, 2013, thermoplastic on linen, 304.8 x 214.8 cm,
courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery

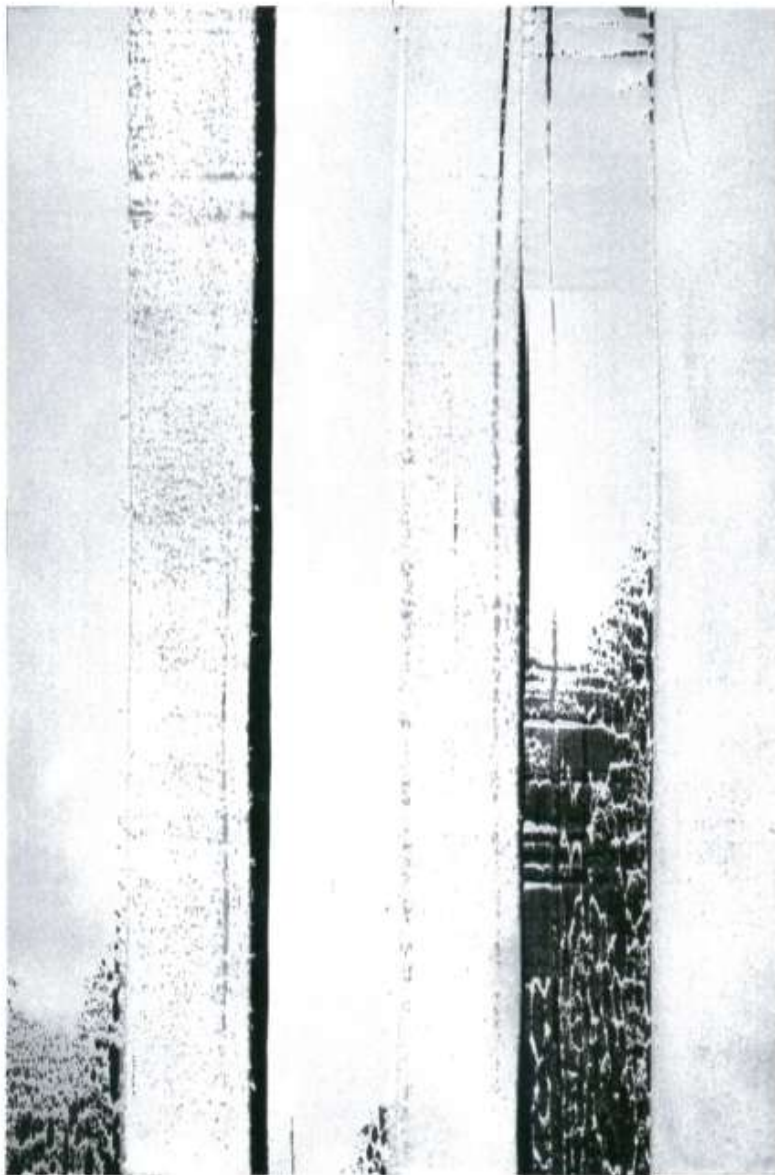


wood and painted it yellow. I did many terrible things. I took all his 16mm home movies, unravelled them, put them on a piece of plywood and torched them to make a kind of fantastic Jackson Pollock. But they never got angry at me. They always understood some part of what I was doing, or rather my need to do it, and believed in me.' His parents' faith was not unfounded, as these celluloid Pollocks would eventually grow to become an extensive and successful practice.

Nares was born in London but moved to New York when he was 21. 'In London, when I was there, it was a very different place,' he explains, 'I just couldn't find very many people who were interested in the same kind of things I was, which were the American artists I was reading about in all the magazines. I always felt a little misunderstood. So when the opportunity came to go to New York, which I knew was the Mecca of things that interested me, I jumped at the chance. When I reached New York, I was like a sponge. I was very young and everything and everybody who had a presence

in New York inspired me, even people like Bruce Nauman or Ed Ruscha who didn't actually have a physical presence in New York. The art scene was smaller then, you kind of felt you knew everybody. The city was a different place too. You could get enormous lofts in Lower Manhattan for no money. It was all wreckage, just beautiful wreckage.'

Looking at his mature brushstroke paintings, one gets the sense that each stroke, simple though it may be, is the culmination of a long process. I ask Nares how he feels he has arrived at this. 'You know, the brushstrokes, for me they're almost proof of my existence. There are certainly constants that run through the work. I think Amy Taubin [the film critic] put it very nicely when she wrote that my preoccupation with movement and time and weight and measure is something that I have returned to time and time again, in many different ways over the years. I feel that movement of one kind or another has always informed my work, and that has developed and culminated in the apex of my brush paintings.'



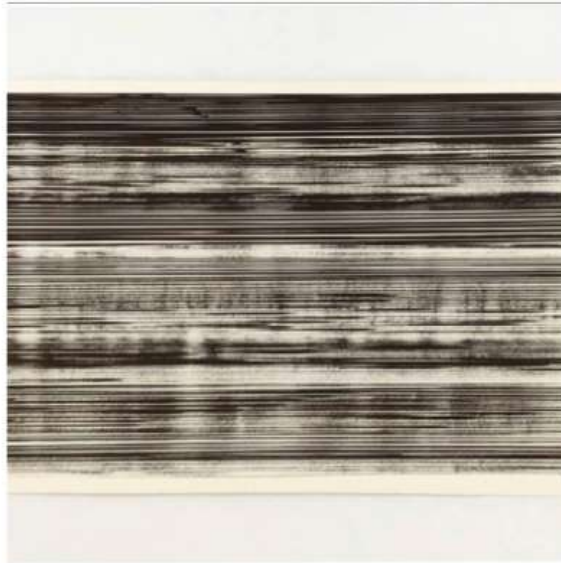
Burn Rubber, 2013, thermoplastic on linen, 304.8 x 243.8 cm, courtesy of the artist and Paul Kosmin Gallery

Interview

The Velocity of James Nares

RACHEL SMALL
SEPTEMBER 10, 2014

ART
**THE VELOCITY
OF JAMES
NARES**
By RACHEL SMALL



Some might recognize the the art of James Nares from the enormous swooping ribbons of paint he applies to canvases while hanging from a harness. Others might know him from his video *Steet* (2011), which depicts a high-definition slow-motion panorama of New York at street-level, and which drew crowds last year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The common thread through three decades of work is Nares' fascination with movement. On view at Paul Kasmin beginning this week, his latest series is no exception.

Dubbed "High Speed Drawings," Nares created the pieces by wrapping sheets of heavyweight Saunders paper around a mechanized steel drum, which, when turned on, rotates fast enough to generate a loud hum. He then takes a paint brush attached to a homemade ink dispenser, and, barely moving his hand, forms strings of color until the canvas is to his liking. "It's like a constant feed," he says of his brushes, which he rigged with a fishing rod. "I can make the finest lines with it. And I can make pretty big smudgy lines too." (Nares is known for inventing tools to make his art. "All my inventions are inventions of necessity," he adds.)

With "High Speed Drawings," the unfurled paper is the final result. From afar, lines can appear as specific as pinstripes. But it's not so up close: It's a challenge, if not impossible to spot one line that goes straight across. "They morph into something else as they move along," says Nares. "There's this organic feeling to something that's quite mechanical."

Nares was born in Britain, and moved to New York in 1974, where he started out as a photographer, eventually becoming a musician and filmmaker of the punk subsect No Wave movement in the late 1970s and 80s. A show last year at Paul Kasmin displayed snapshots he took of Soho and Tribeca when he first arrived to the city. In the press release, Nares connected his youthful interest in the street scenes to *Street*, which he shot in 2011. This latest series is an adjacent step to the film. "That was a high-speed camera; these are high-speed drawings," he explains. "The whole film is one line. And these are one-liners too, in a way." Nares can't help but hone in on movement—here, fleeting, minute motions. "In *Street*, you see little moments that happen between people—gestures that are very small, but they become amplified and very important," he describes. "The paintings are a bit like that. The movements of the brush... I move too quickly to calculate what I'm doing. It's a marriage of design and spontaneity of the moment. A good marriage. I like to think so."

*"JAMES NARES: HIGH SPEED DRAWINGS" IS ON VIEW
AT PAUL KASMIN GALLERY AT 293 TENTH AVENUE
FROM SEPTEMBER 10 TO OCTOBER 25, 2014.*

FRIEZE

James Nares

GLENN O'BRIEN
SEPTEMBER 7, 2013



James Nares, *Street*, 2011, video still.

You wouldn't expect the last of the Caravaggisti to be an abstract painter, but then James Nares is more than an abstract painter. He has been investigating nature for 40 years, pursuing the science of aesthetics. Most of Nares's works are experiments with physics, light and form that follow nature – not so much the day-to-day view, but depictions of macrocosmic and microcosmic detail. Every once in a while, however, Nares looks at humanity as it is and the results are extraordinarily revelatory.

Some years ago, after his doctor ordered him to stop painting for a while – and you should understand that his painting process at the time involved suspending himself over the canvas in an acrobat's rig – Nares turned to photographic motion studies that brought the inquiries of Eadweard Muybridge and Harold Edgerton to the frontier of contemporary lens craft and lighting.

The association with Caravaggio never occurred to me until I saw Nares's film *Street* (2011) at the Metropolitan Museum, where it plays more or less hourly. Art's most powerful role, at least to some observers, is its enhancement of vision, both literally and figuratively. I can't think of any contemporary work that provides a more powerful and revelatory perspective than this film.

In discussing *Street*, Caravaggio's name came up again and again. It seems odd, but I think it's because the work extends realism into an enhanced arena, through a trick of time. All photography stops time, but slowing it down changes our perspective on motion in a dramatic and illuminating way. The popular and melodramatic television show *Da Vinci's Demons* (2013–ongoing) explains Leonardo's genius, in part, as being his ability to slow down time, and we see him, again and again, in gimmicky 'a-ha' moments, buying birds in the market place, releasing them and

then – as we go to the slo-mo cam in his brain – he sketches how flight is achieved. He goes slow-motion and then, of course, he goes out and builds the ornithopter. Nares doesn't need that magical mental gift. He used a very good camera. A high-definition, high-speed camera. After seeing the film several times I realized that Caravaggio was the first HD painter – that hi-def is 21st century for chiaroscuro.

Just as early motion-study photography revolutionized our understanding of the physical world (as the auxiliary exhibition curated by Nares from the Met's own collection quietly points out), and influenced artists such as the Vorticists and Futurists (Nares cites Umberto Boccioni in particular), the artist's own rich motion study conducted on the streets of New York, with a high-speed camera from a moving car, transforms our perceptions of humanity through the simple but profound alteration of the time frame.

In the 1960s, psychedelia explored certain techniques of altering perception, from strobe lights to animated forms of globular Abstract Expressionism made to accompany rock music in such displays as the Joshua Light Show, apparently as a synergistic enhancement to music already abetted by the use of psychedelic or theogenic drugs. When the disco strobe was deployed, we suddenly saw dancers in a whole new light, catching individual frames of their freak outs.

Compared to such Dionysian displays of mind-alteration, *Street* is a serene, Apollonian contemplation of the real world dramatically slowed down. This is a temporal microcosm, where we see that every human seems to walk differently while every pigeon seems to fly in the same way. We begin to see humanity as a species of profound variety.



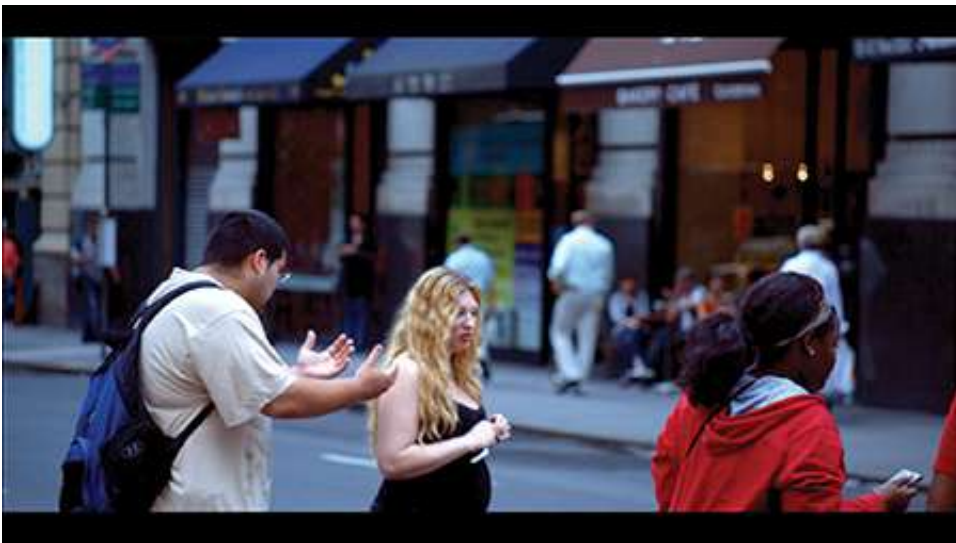
James Nares, *Street*, 2011, video still.

Throughout his career, Nares has been interested in the interface between art and science, and many of his early works deal with a kind of aesthetic physics and the relationship between the human body and the material world. Nares loves equipment and he is a relentless inventor of art-making tools. His famous brushstroke paintings are made with the use of a device he invented to suspend himself over the canvas and move in mid-air. He has long made his own brushes and these are works of art in their own right. Lately, he has been working with a rotary drawing machine of his own invention, a sort of graphic lathe, and his latest batch of paintings was created using the kind of heavy-duty machine normally used to paint the lines on roads and that same fluorescent white line paint.

Some years ago, Nares learned that the University of Tennessee was selling a lot of equipment from its photography department, including specialized cameras that were used for aerial photography or for photographing the highspeed motion of objects such as bullets. This led him to the high-definition Phantom Flex, which can shoot at speeds up to 10,750 frames per second. The camera was set in a van that was driven through the streets of Manhattan at speeds ranging from 30 to 40 miles per hour. The result, *Street*, is literally a new vision of humanity. Here humans move at the pace of lava or ketchup, oozing forward, sometimes seeming frozen in place – virtually inanimate. Lightbulbs blink like lighthouses, the 60 cycles per second of the New York electrical grid slow to a quickened heartbeat.

The alternate consciousness we dip into watching *Street* seems to transport us to the perceptive realm of another species. I kept thinking that this is an ‘angel’s eye view’ of humanity. Observing the variegated parade of humanity on Manhattan’s curbside, we see a diversity that is almost astonishing. Imagine closely inspecting herds of deer, or schools of dolphins. How much variation would we observe? But among humans, in their extraordinary range of clothing, their cultural stylings, their tremendously varied physiques (including many which, except for the intervention of science, would no longer be animated), it’s hard to see that we’re cut from the same cloth. What you see here might make you reconsider the question posed by the 1932 film *The Island of Lost Souls* or the 1970s band Devo: ‘Are we not men?’

How do other life forms perceive the world? The bee, its lifetime six weeks, its wings beating 250 times per second; the Galapagos tortoise, its lifetime 180 years, its heartbeat six times per minute. We see life as an incarnate electromagnetic spectrum, from the microscopic creature live for a matter of seconds to the slow-moving, long-living and relatively massive tortoise or elephant. Even humans seem to encompass a vast spectrum of energies that range from the infra to the ultra.



James Nares, *Street*, 2011, video still.

Everyone we pass in *Street* is alive, but some seem far more alive than others. Individuals have different speeds, different pitches – some seem to move at 33rpm, some at 45rpm, some at 78rpm. We sense death lurking behind some slow-moving seniors, while children cavort at relatively high speeds, keen and effervescent. People seem to range between tortoise and butterfly, between a crawl and a flutter. Some appear to be evolving to a higher pitch, those attuned enough to connect with the racing shutter.

While most of the passing parade seems mired in thought, minds and attention elsewhere, individuals cut through the fog of time to focus their attention on the camera, making a mysterious, almost psychic eye contact with the lens. Rare individuals cut through the crowd with their gaze, more like focused predators than one of the grazing herd. Some of those who catch the eye elicit a sixth sense or a seventh, their consciousness preceding them, their eyes on the horizon. Alertness belongs to a tiny minority, in touch with their animality.

Concupiscence is suddenly detectable. Some men check out passing women; some check out the trash cans they are passing. Some women check themselves in the glass that they pass. A man looks to the sky, as if for a sign. A sudden thought registers visibly on a face. Legions walk without looking ahead, staring at small idols that turn out to be telephones, while others hold them to their heads as if for comfort. They are neither here nor there.

An apocalyptic mood hangs over the street – a nameless inevitability that confronts the nameless assembly, an entropic hum of lowering expectation. We pass an antique store with a 19th-century clock for sale on the sidewalk, and time itself seems antique.

We move past a tiny four year old, apparently lost in prayer. A man in a New York Giants shirt has a stump for an arm, the end of the stump resembling a nipple. The blind move about with white canes and minders, yet in a way not terribly different from those with the option to see. We see the slap on the back as more intimate than before, and the embracing couple as literally attempting to occupy the same space, the same flesh. We pass gaggles of teenage girls, self-conscious, group-conscious, all in very short shorts. We pass a knot of cops. One salutes another. One peers at the crowd in displeasure. One hold his hand on his pistol.

An athletic black man walks alone down the sidewalk in running shoes. Two blonde daughters of a blonde catch the camera easily and signal at it with weird expressions and hand gestures as bizarre as those used by baseball coaches. We pass the Naked Cowboy in his underpants, holding a guitar on Times Square and he doesn't look any stranger than anyone else. Two young women walk quickly, the fingers of the one with the boy haircut press into the soft flesh of the more feminine girl's arm. A tourist points to a fuzzy Mickey Mouse impersonator like he's a long-lost friend. A tattooed man in a bandana glares as if felonies are passing through his imagination. An old black man inhales the last pull on his filter cigarette and flicks the butt in perfect stride, a little meteor in the shadows.

A family stands outside a synagogue. Little children torque their elders by full body yanks of the hand. A dignified old man raises his palm rabbinically. Is he saying: 'Behold!?' No, it's starting to rain. Suddenly in the crowd are people dressed in bin bags. Umbrellas erect. The pace quickens. A woman hails a taxi. A bearded Coptic priest wearing a large cross strides ahead with a handful of money and, catching the camera, shows alarm. A sick man rubs his liver. A boy runs, holding a Pokémon, delighted to match the van in stride. A street vendor sells little plastic guns that shoot soap bubbles. We follow the bubbles in the breeze as they float past the people, and then we realize that we are the bubbles.

Sometimes a perfect specimen passes by in this freak show, reminding us that our species was once sound and whole, like the pigeons. What happened? Must be ... evolution? And here we see evolution is a two-way street.

In a funny way, Street is akin to John Carpenter's 1988 film *They Live*, in which the hero, a construction worker played by the wrestler Rowdy Roddy Piper, accidentally discovers a cache of sunglasses that enable him to see that the earth is actually occupied by humans and by an alien overlord species whose horrible appearance and messages of control hidden in advertising cannot be conventionally seen.

In *Street*, a feeling of doom seems to hang over the city, but there is no despair. Everyone is too busy going or thinking of going. Everyone is too in the future or too in the past. Is it the music, or the languid light or the terrible scarcity of beauty that evokes a misquoting of T.S. Eliot? 'I had not thought life had undone so many.' Still the feeling *Street* sparks is empathy – empathy in the face of entropy. How can we save them? Us? Slowed-down life seems more fleeting, yet persists. If it ends, perhaps it ends like this, all together, in a crowd on a street, slowly.

Throughout the parade, Thurston Moore's acoustic guitar strums a changing tapestry of chords, moving major to minor and back, catching the rhythm of light-bulb, rain, shutter, brainwave. A crowd swarms the TKTS booth in Times Square. Little do they know time has been squared and they are in it. What do they want tickets for? Where is there to go?

Brion Gysin said: 'We are here to go.' Where is not the issue, it seems. Nor is why. But how.

The New York Times

A Galloping City Captured in Slow Motion

MARTHA SWENDENER

AUGUST 12, 2012



VIGNETTES James Nares's video "STREET" captures scenes filmed in Manhattan.

There are moments in history when everything interesting seems to take place indoors: clandestine meetings, documents being signed, objects and discoveries being made in private studios and ateliers. The past year, however, saw a different moment, in which plazas were occupied and protests and revolutions unfolded in the streets. Public space was activated - which might partially explain why James Nares's "STREET," at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, feels particularly relevant at this moment.

Mr. Nares's 61-minute video sits in a curious place, somewhere between still and moving images. It has the uncanny look of a 3-D slide show or some hybrid of photography and film; it also calls to mind the stereo-graphic viewers that were popular in the 19th century. Shown in slow motion, the people Mr. Nares filmed on the streets of Manhattan look like cutouts placed into deep pockets of space.

Mr. Nares filmed the video with a high-definition Phantom Flex camera (using an Angenieux Optima 17-80 millimeter T2.2 zoom lens, for those who need to know). The edited footage is shown in slow motion, but the video employs another trick: the Phantom Flex is usually used in a stationary position to film fast-moving subjects, but Mr. Nares's camera reversed this. It was positioned in the back of a sport utility vehicle that was driven through Manhattan at 30 to 40 miles per hour.

Occasionally, you will see someone "famous" on the streets of New York, like the Naked Cowboy, a performer who plays the acoustic guitar in his under-wear. But mostly the video is a reminder of how cities are filled with strangers - what modern artists like T. S. Eliot and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner identified as the strangely novel sensation of being alone in a crowd (although one wonders if ancient Romans ever felt the same way).

Some of the most fascinating moments involve animals and insects. Watching a pigeon fly in 3-D slow motion takes you back to the photographic experiments of Eadweard Muybridge, who captured "animal locomotion."

Muybridge's first subject, famously, was a galloping horse. Here, the movements of the pigeon become an updated supplement to that narrative. Similarly, a fly moving through the frame at a faster rate than the walking humans underscores how the animals and insects that live among us experience reality- time, gravity and motion - in an entirely different way.



"James Nares: STREET" is at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art through Oct. 28.

Unlike in photography, with its singular moment, people here are caught in the process of having an expression. And there are other effects: streetlights pulse at an unfamiliar rate; a cigarette butt tossed from a hand flies erratically through the air; falling rain looks, because of the slower speed and greater volume of 3-D, like snow.

"STREET" feels like a silent movie, except it is accompanied by a jangling, sometimes droning acoustic guitar soundtrack composed and performed by Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth. The alternate tuning of the guitar, at once dissonant and unfamiliar, has all the markings of a Sonic Youth instrumental. Mr. Nares himself was in a downtown New York band in the 1970s and made Super 8 films that served as a kind of visual complement to the No Wave and punk scene of that moment, and there is the vague sense of overlap with the past and the present.

But Mr. Nares's film is an eon away from the rough street aesthetic of the '70s. Instead, it feels - and particularly because it is exhibited in a museum - linked more to a whole art history of street art, which is like a genre of its own within the field. There is, of course, the bold graffiti made with spray-paint cans starting in the 1970s, often cited as America's most widely known and globally circulated aesthetic. But the earliest photographs often focused on the street: an 1839 daguerreotype by Louis-Jacques-Mantle Daguerre featured a view of the Rue du Temple in Paris, and another French photographer, Eugene Atget, took thousands of photographs documenting spookily depopulated Parisian streets. In the 1960s, Garry Winogrand and Diane Arbus offered oblique critiques of America during the Vietnam War era by focusing on people on the street, and more recent artists like Jeff Wall, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Beat Streuli and Paul Graham and videographers like Kim Sooja use a combination of documentation and manipulation to create contemporary visions of urban streets.

Mr. Nares's video isn't explicitly political, and yet there are, at all times, distinct markers of how cities are divided along class, race and economic lines. Although he keeps the camera trained at street level - generally below the

second floors of buildings - you can often tell where you are, based on a knowl-edge of where tourists go and where different populations live.

New York looks a little more battered in Mr. Nares's representation than in many recent street-art works that highlight the Bloomberg era of gentrification and development. "STREET" also makes you aware, however, of how technol-ogy can radically change perception. It is a new representation of the city in which the still and the moving images are blurred, in which everything is sta-tionary but shifting, and in which nothing is happening and, at the same time, there is too much to comprehend.

ARTFORUM

James Nares

SARAH LOOKOFSKY

JANUARY 18, 2012

James Nares

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

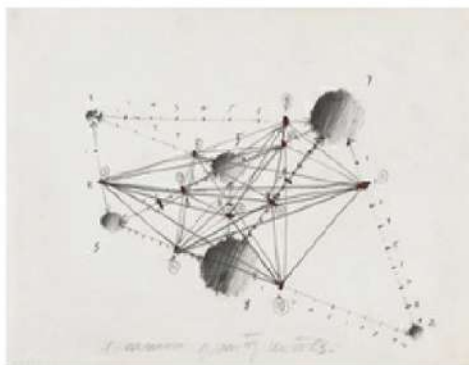
293 Tenth Avenue

January 5–February 11

Manhattan is an odd tabula rasa. In the press release for his latest exhibition, James Nares is quoted as saying that Lower Manhattan “nurtured the talent of a generation inspired by its vast emptiness.” While his statement of course misconstrues the centuries of building and demolition that preceded this artist’s arrival to the metropolitan site, such a willful denial of precedent is not uncommon in an emerging generation of makers. That said, the citation has a certain resonance with the works on view, which include drawings, photographs, diagrams, and objects that depict a Lower Manhattan nearly absent of inhabitants and vehicles—most notably, the 1976 film *Pendulum*, in which the artist hung a wire with a lead concrete sphere at its end from a footbridge on Staple Street. The length of the suspension allows the ball to swing almost the entire span of the alley. Though there is a scientific pretense here (mass, energy, movement), the groan of the wire, combined with a multiplicity of almost expressionist shots that include some dramatic angles featuring the artist’s body and shadow, result in something totally anathema to physics class.

With this exhibition, the pendulum is swung into our present, and it necessarily picks up new connotations along the way. September 11, which would become an ideological “blank slate” that denied the consideration of precedents and justified a general clampdown on public space, came to mind. When looking back, however, it is important to stay wary of idealizations of 1970s New York; the city teetered on bankruptcy and large sections of the population lived in poverty. Nevertheless, given the current ubiquity of security guards, surveillance cameras, and cops in Lower Manhattan, this document of scaling a city structure, suspending a ball, and letting it swing freely may generate, as it did for me, a kind of magical thinking in New York now.

— Sarah Lookofsky



James Nares, *Untitled (Pendulum and Gravity Drawing)*, 1976, pencil on paper, 8 1/2 x 11”.

Interview

James Nares

GLENN O'BRIEN
AUGUST 26, 2010



Where I'm Going, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

James Nares did not immediately rocket to the top of the New York painting scene. The Englishman turned New Yorker had to go through many phases to get there. He practically had to shoot himself in the foot. (Literally and metaphorically—you know the English and their hunting.) He was a No Wave musician, a filmmaker and performer, and a leading member of the living-dangerously clique of the '70s and '80s. But no matter what he was going through, he always worked at his art with elegance and grace, and he was always greatly admired (and collected) by fellow artists, many of them more successful than himself. Finally, over the last decade, the handsome, towering, snooker-playing, self-effacing painter has finally begun to achieve the recognition he deserves. His paintings can be found in many great collections and at the Paul Kasmin Gallery. And a retrospective of 30 years of filmmaking was held recently at the Anthology Film Archives in New York. I interviewed my old friend at his apartment in Chelsea, where he was picking away on an oud, and at my house in the country, where Nares is here and there on the walls.

GLENN O'BRIEN: What brought you to New York?

JAMES NARES: My friend Seth Tillett. I'd been at school with him, and he lived in New York. I ran into him on the street in London. All I did was read American art magazines. I felt like a real loner in London, being interested in all these artists that nobody else seemed to have heard of.

GO: Who were you interested in?

JN: I was interested in the Avalanche magazine people.

GO: Like Vito Acconci?

JN: I loved Vito. And really the whole spectrum of what was happening, from Gordon Matta-Clark on down. Seth told a story about going to the Broome Street Bar and turning around, and the guy next to him was Robert Rauschenberg, and they got into a big talk. That sealed the deal for me. The idea of being able to walk into a local bar and sit next to Rauschenberg was too much to resist.

GO: Had you been making art in London?

JN: Yeah. Ever since I was tiny. It was the thing I could do. They weren't quite sure what to do with me. But I seemed to be well occupied and out of trouble when I was making art, so they encouraged that.

GO: What kind of work did you make as a youth?

JN: I painted the neighbors' rhododendrons bright red with enamel. That was beautiful. I remember my mother came and said, "What are you doing, children?" "Painting." "Oh, how wonderful." That red-and-green thing has stuck with me ever since. I made a fountain out of my step-dad's tuba. He never played the tuba. I don't know why he had one, but I mounted it on a chimney stack and connected the garden hose and made this beautiful musical fountain. They were very long-suffering, my parents. I took old 16mm home movies, which I really regret now, and melted them onto a board with a blowtorch and made a kind of [Jackson] Pollock-spaghetti-melted film painting. It was quite beautiful. But it ruined those memories forever. They were like, "Well, that's very nice, James. That's beautiful."

GO: What's your oldest extant work?

JN: My mother has a horrible little woolen doll character. God, it's ugly. It looks like a voodoo doll. I don't know how I made it or why. I also have a great autobiography that I wrote when I was 5. It has a self-portrait on the cover, with little pictures inside. It starts off matter-of-fact and then it ends abruptly with a passage about my father dying. It suddenly becomes very tragic. "Then the fangs of death had crept into our household, and it was never quite the same." That was the end of my autobiography at age 5.

GO: So what did you do after arriving in New York?

JN: I hooked up with Seth, and we moved in to this big loft on Jay Street in Tribeca, when it was a total ghost town. September of 1974. The first people whose door I went knocking on were Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear, because I loved their magazine, *Avalanche*. Willoughby was very warm. He opened the house to me. I had seen him do a sort of performance lecture at the Royal College of Art, in London. He had come in and mused around on the stage, pulling wires and setting things up, and that went on for an hour or so before anything happened. There was a bar attached to the lecture hall, and everyone kept getting more and more drunk. After a while, Willoughby turned on a slide projector and flashed through a whole carousel of slides very quickly. This critic I was sitting with and my self were the only ones who knew the artists, so with each artist that came up, we yelled out the name. It was almost like *Name That Tune*. Then Willoughby asked if there were any questions. It was over in about 60 seconds. The audience was appropriately appalled, and I loved it. So when I came here, I said to Willoughby, "I loved the thing you did there. I heard that you were on acid." Willoughby said, "Well, of course I was on acid!" That was my first visitation. The neighborhood there was cool, and 1974 through '76 were very definitive years for me. Richard Serra was very present in the neighborhood and in my mind. I think my early artwork and movies show that.

GO: Did you visit him?

JN: Yeah, I loved his studio on Greenwich Street. He'd just started making those oil-stick, oil-rubbing paintings, and everything was black. The telephone, I remember, was oil-sticked black. Everything was black. It was beautiful.

GO: Were you making work then?



I Do And I Don't, 2003. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

JN: Yeah. The only thing that really survives from that period is my pendulum movies. I hung this enormous pendulum from the bridge on the street where I lived and made a movie just watching the pendulum swing. I also had cast these concrete balls and just left them in vacant lots or in the middle of the street. They looked beautiful. It seems like a long time ago. It also seems like a kind of golden age, those years. Because there was no money . . .

GO: You didn't need money. People would go to Max's Kansas City at cocktail hour and maybe order one drink and eat all this free food. Half the art world was surviving on it.

JN: Openings provided a lot of meals, too. There was a kind of liberation in that. Nothing to lose.

GO: Who did you meet early on?

JN: Lindzee Smith, Julia Heyward, Paula Longendyke-a funny, mixed crew. Boris Policeband, whom I loved, lived with us for a while and ate spaghetti every night and ate only at night. He was the first guy who watched more than one television at a time. He had about 10 TVs, which seemed really radical. There were no remotes. He ran around changing channels while he talked to you.

GO: Around '74, there wasn't a lot going on. I remember Patti Smith was doing stuff.

JN: Yeah, Patti Smith, Television, then Talking Heads.

GO: The first time I saw Talking Heads was at the Lower Manhattan Ocean Club, on Chambers Street. They were a trio.

JN: I saw them there, too. Was Lisa Stroud a great friend of David Byrne's?

GO: She was his girlfriend.

JN: She dragged us all down there to see him. Diego Cortez was a great influence in my life and other people's lives at that time. He was the first one to tie into the things that were happening in the larger world, and he introduced us to more of the music that was coming out of England and that whole attitude toward making art and making music, which we picked up on and applied to our films. I kind of took a left turn out of the art that I'd been making at that time, and went into this other thing. Picked up a guitar. James Chance said he was forming a band.

GO: Did you meet him through Diego?

JN: Possibly. We had this little garage on Jay Street, in the same building where we lived. Our landlords parked their big Cadillacs in the garage during the day, and after they left at night, we ran in and put up a movie screen and showed movies and did performances. I met James when he was playing there with a trio. It seems like a different city altogether. It was a ghost town—the whole of lower Manhattan, from 14th Street down, was just wreckage. Beautiful wreckage.

GO: Did you have any kind of gainful employment?

JN: I did odd jobs with a couple of friends. We had a construction outfit called the Three Aces. We pretended that we knew how to do things, and then figured out how to do them. Somehow we managed to work it out on the fly. We put up a few things—I doubt whether they are still standing. I had a friend who was a plumber. He dragged me off in the middle of the night to fix someone's toilet in a little apartment, and the owner was a guy called Philip Glass, a musician. I fixed his toilet.

GO: Was your first band the Contortions?

JN: The first band was the Contortions. James Chance said he was forming a band, and would I play guitar? I said yes. I was always one of those people who wanted to do everything, and it was just too good of an opportunity. Everyone has a small percentage in them, at some point, where they want to be a rock 'n' roll player of some sort. Some do it and stick with it, and others just take a dip. I took a dip with the Contortions.

GO: Well, that was a pretty good dip.

JN: It was a good dip, yeah. It was a great band.

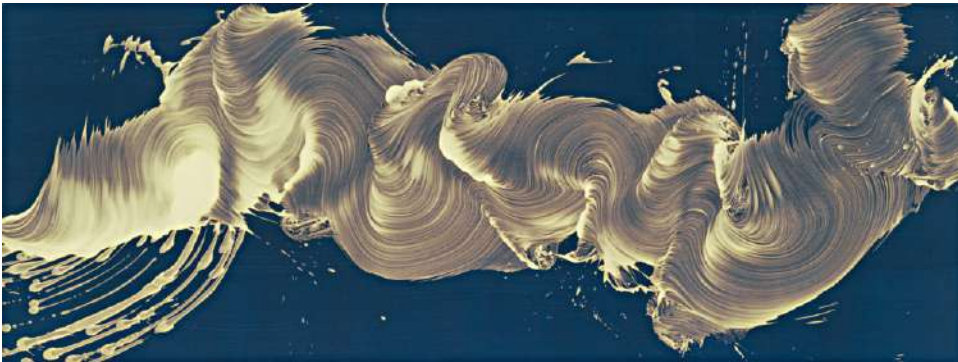
GO: So it was James and you and Pat Place?

JN: Even before that, it was James, myself, and Anne Deon, who was Alan Vega's girlfriend, and the same drummer James had for a while. Then the drummer quit, and Anne Deon stepped in . . . We loved her, but she had difficulty keeping time. One day she was no longer there. Then Chiko Hige and Reck came in, the Japanese bass-and-drums combo—they were fantastic. Then Pat came in, and then Adele [Bertei]. I remember we were rehearsing in this old movie theater on Delancey Street where Lydia Lunch was living upstairs. I think Mars and those guys were all living in that rehearsal space. We were rehearsing there and Adele walked in, and James just took one look at her, and she looked so good that he said he wanted her in the band. That was an addition based on something very superficial that turned out to have depth. She was great. She sang one song with us, "Chain of Fools," and she did it as good as Aretha Franklin. Adele is tiny, but she had the biggest voice. We played all the going clubs—Max's, CBGB. I quit just

before Brian Eno did *No New York* [1978]. It was funny, I had just quit the band and went to London, and then he came over to New York and made that record.

GO: You were also making movies.

JN: I'd always made these short Super-8 movies, and a couple of longer ones. But then Eric Mitchell was a great inspiration to me. Eric Mitchell and the whole attitude of learning your instrument by playing it that was around then. We applied that to filmmaking. We would act in one another's films. I'd be doing sound on someone's film one day, and camera on somebody else's, and acting in another the next day. We exchanged roles with a great deal of freedom from one day to the next. We made films as quickly and cheaply as we could, and we made them about our own lives-or thinly disguised versions of our lives-and we showed them in our own cinema on St. Marks Place, the New Cinema. We showed our films on a video screen. We couldn't afford to have prints made, so we had video dubs made from the original Super-8. It was maybe the first video movie theater. It was a terrible picture. Amy Taubin [the longtime film critic for *The Village Voice*] described it as "bent pink soup," which it was. That was a great moment. To have fun making art was something that the generation before mine was not supposed to do. That the joy of making it should be apparent.



What I Saw, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

GO: There was so much talent in those films. It's funny, because you overlooked the flaws—or they even enhanced it. It was interesting to see your film *Rome '78* [1978] again. I remember thinking that it was an epic when I first saw it. Thirty years later, the thing I noticed about *Rome '78* was Eric seemingly watching himself in the monitor, admiring himself.

JN: [laughs] There wasn't a monitor. He's looking off camera, reading the script. Or maybe admiring himself in somebody else's eyes. That's kind of what one did. It was a funny time. It was very dark, and I loved flirting with danger . . . but it was also about having fun, which seemed radical—the idea of having fun. I said to Frank Stella the other day, at the gallery . . . I was admiring some new works of his, and I said, "God, this looks great! It looks like you really had fun making it." And he just turned around and walked off, and I realized that's a sort of generational distinction. To have fun making art was something that the generation before mine was not supposed to do. That the joy of making it should be apparent, I find it quite a redeeming quality.

GO: When did you get serious about painting?

JN: I had been a painter before I came to New York. But when I came to New York, I wasn't interested in painting at all. Then around '82, I guess, I realized that I couldn't do everything. I wanted to make movies, I wanted to make

music, I wanted to make art. I figured that I couldn't be good at all of them and make a living at the same time and that I should probably focus on what I knew best. So in 1982, when painting was enjoying a kind of new life, I caught the bug.

GO: You're like the last of the Action Painters.

JN: Well, I wanted to find something in painting that I could identify as my own. And I kind of stripped it down for myself to the things that seemed most important. A lot of it had to do with reinventing the brush, the surface, and the paint. It's those three things that I kind of came up with my own versions of, or my own mixtures of. They're pretty simple, the ingredients to my paintings. I like to think of it as like making bread or something. A little change in the recipe and you get something completely different.

GO: You make your own brushes and you have invented a series of devices to make paintings with. Talk about how that evolved.

JN: Well, my devices were all born of necessity, because I've always had the problem—which a lot of painters have—of making a large version of something that works well small. Once I'd reduced the paintings and stripped away everything and was left with the brushstroke, I thought that to increase the size of the brushstroke would be a sort of simple mathematical enlargement thing. If you make it bigger, you simply make a bigger brushstroke. But when the size changes, the physics of the thing changes.

GO: I remember when you were in Bridgehampton, New York, in the barn in the cornfield, and you were trying to suspend yourself over the canvas.

JN: Yeah. All those things have been invention based on necessity. I couldn't make a big painting using the paint that I'd use . . . I couldn't do it vertically. It had to be horizontal because of the drip. And a big painting, I couldn't reach the whole surface. So that was one of my many attempts at a solution, to reach the middle of a large painting without making it stand vertically. I remember forgetting to hook myself into the rig one time, and I launched myself at the canvas and just fell face-first into the painting.

They work only if they are anti-gravity, like they have sort of been blown onto the canvas like some sort of Tiepolo figure up in the sky or something.

GO: Your painting rig evolved out of the necessity to be above the painting?

JN: I needed to be above the painting because the paint is so liquid that it will drip, and I never want any sign of gravity to show in the paintings. They work only if they are kind of antigravity, like they have sort of been blown onto the canvas like some sort of Tiepolo figure up in the sky or something. If there's any orientation like a drip, it kills the effect. A lot of the early work was on paper, and with a piece of paper you have access to the rectangle at any point of entrance or exit. And you can move outside of the rectangle or come back in. There's complete freedom of access to any part of the rectangle. But when I made it bigger, I couldn't reach in the same way. Which is why I made this rig so I could paint as if I were working on a piece of paper.

GO: In your earlier brushstroke paintings, you were deliberately letting the residue of the failed figures accumulate on the white, so there was this very, very subtle, kind of ghostly underpainting.

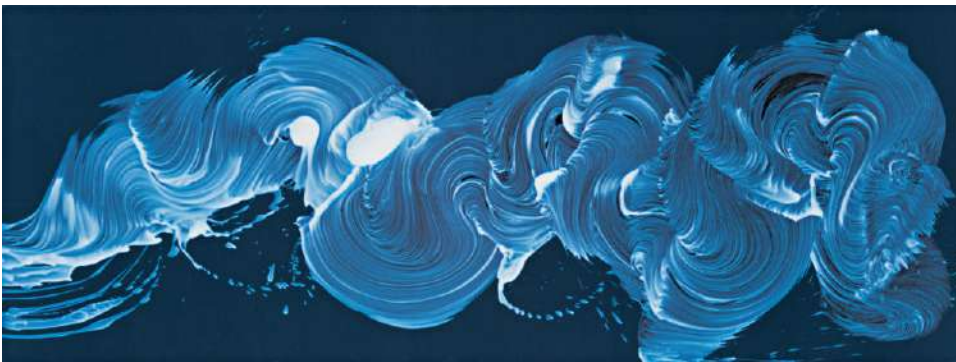
JN: I liked to feel that the work that I put into the painting was somehow visible. I liked the patina of the history of the painting. But after a while it became unnecessary. And then I ended up taking that out, too. I found by taking any event out of the ground, I was left with an infinite space, because the painting is about the brushstroke really—it's not about anything else.

GO: To me, the ones that are on the pure white or pure background are a lot more three-dimensional—they really are kind of gravity-defying. They're really floating in space.

JN: I think I always wanted to fly. Flight has always been a preoccupation of mine. Like the little old painting in your guest room, *Yaw, Pitch and Roll*: That has a picture of Louis Blériot and one of his flying machines in the background. My grandmother once flew with Blériot.

GO: Really?

JN: Yeah, strapped to the wing in a big hat. Blériot was the first to fly the English Channel. She was there when he landed and he gave her a ride. She was 18, and she put on a big hat, and in a long white dress, she went up, strapped tight to the wing of a biplane. Maybe flight is in my genes.



Where I Benn, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

GO: With your big brushstroke paintings—you're in your rig making strokes and your assistant is there squeegeeing off the paint when you aren't satisfied with the result, which is most of the time. How many strokes do you do before you have a keeper?

JN: It depends. I liken it to playing baseball and trying to hit a home run. Sometimes you get lucky and the first pop it goes out of the ballpark. Other times you go quite a few games before anything happens. I can do hundreds of attempts and not get a keeper. And I've got it on the first attempt.

GO: How long does it take you to decide if a stroke has got it or not?

JN: I kind of know it immediately. Sometimes I'll keep it in spite of myself, because there's something about it. Maybe I don't like it, but there's something about it that makes it difficult to erase—and quite often that'll be a particularly good painting. I guess that's because what I'm after is to surprise myself somehow, to kind of step out of the picture and let it surprise me. I guess that's what all artists do, in a way. I do feel that I've reduced my painting work to this one thing, but there's a kind of endless range of expression within that very simple structure that I've given myself.

It's like there's an element of music, there's an element of movie, there's a beginning, a middle, and an end—there's a little narrative there. It's like writing telegrams or something.

GO: Do you feel a connection with the abstract expressionists?

JN: I think the connection is there—that's very obvious—but what I do is sort of anti-that, in that it's very repetitive. I'm doing the same thing over and over and over. Everything in my studio goes in circles. I move in circles, the paint goes on and the paint goes off, and it goes down and it comes off, and it's very repetitive—like a lot of my short movies, which are taking a repetitive gesture and celebrating that.

GO: But are you going for an automatic thing? How conscious are you? You know, like Yogi Berra said, "You can't think and hit . . ."

JN: It's right there, right on that line between thinking and hitting. You've got to be aware of it, but not too aware. It's a search for that perfect place right down the middle, where neither rules.

GO: So you started making brushes because you couldn't buy brushes that worked?

JN: Yeah. And I found that brushes are like characters in a way: Each one does a different dance. I started gathering different brush-making materials and putting them together—synthetics, naturals . . .

GO: Did you know anything about brushes?

JN: No, I didn't. I just figured it out. I did some reading. And I did some looking. And I took brushes apart and examined them, and then reconfigured them in different ways, and talked to people in the brush-making industry and the bristle-importing business, and I kind of put it all together with a lot of five-minute epoxy and fishing rods and anything that seemed like it might work as a brush. The first one I made looked like a space rocket, and it took me about two weeks to make. It was big, and it was clumpy, and I shaped it using a pair of thinning scissors that you give someone a haircut with. And a few days and several large blisters on my fingers later, I had a brush.

GO: Did it work?

JN: It kind of worked. But there were things about it that didn't work. And that's been the story ever since. I think 90 percent of the brushes I make don't do the thing that I hope they will do and get shelved. But then quite often I find a use for them later. I usually make a brush with a particular thing in mind.

GO: A lot of them look great. It's great just to see the variety and the crazy, almost Rube Goldberg-like inventive quality of the things that you've tried, like with feathers. . . .

JN: Anything from feathers to foam rubber.

GO: Is that always evolving, or have you sort of arrived at something that's working for the paintings you do now?

JN: I've arrived at something that works for now. I do have this sort of holy grail of the ideal filament and combination of different filaments at different lengths and strengths and with different degrees of snap and taper and everything. But I need to persuade the guys at DuPont to make it for me, and I haven't been able to yet. They've

been very generous with me in giving me different things that I've asked for. But I haven't got them to reconfigure their machines yet to actually extract a bristle to my kind of ultimate design. I'm working on it. The ones I'm using now are synthetic, which is good for the animals. It's a DuPont filament-three different kinds of filament combined.

GO: And do they build them for you or do you make them?

JN: I make them. To make the ones I like most right now, I take household brushes and chop them up and glue them back together again and put my own handles on. And the brushes are like the characters in my drama or something. I bring them onto the stage, and I kind of know what they can do, and I turn them loose within the confines of the studio, like dancers.



James Nares in his studio. Courtesy of James Nares.

GO: You bought the contents of a high-speed film laboratory from the University of Tennessee on eBay, right?

JN: It wasn't eBay. It was something called GovDeals. I bid \$250 on a whim for the entire contents of the University of Tennessee high-speed movie lab, thinking that somebody would bid a little higher than that, and the closer it got to the end of the auction, the more I realized that there was a possibility I might actually win the thing-which I did. So I got the whole for 250 bucks, and I dispatched Tom Jarmusch down there to pick it up in a truck. It was quite amusing. When he got there, the guys in the warehouse kept saying, "Say thank you to your friend for relieving us of this burden." It kind of worked out good in the end, but I did get a lot of stuff that I just threw straight away. Tom came back with a truckload of wires and cameras and parts of cameras and lenses. . . . I got these amazing cameras that were encased in rubber-gun-sight cameras for filming the bullets coming out of the guns to calibrate them or something. They have these wonderful, big wide-angle lenses. I didn't even know they were cameras when I first looked at them. I thought it was some piece of machinery. I got a couple of those, and I got a couple of these enormous cast-iron cameras, which go at 10,000 frames a second with a rotating prism instead of a gate, so the film

just runs through, vroom, like this. It doesn't go click-click-click-click-click. It just runs when the prism rotates. I've got many, many ideas for films from that.

GO: Are they shorts, or—

JN: Most of them are shorts, and a couple of them are longer ones. But they're mostly in the 8- to 10-minute range. There are a couple of half-hour ones. That's about as long as I can get without losing my attention. My attention abilities are curtailed somewhat. Whatever the hell I did with my life . . .

GO: There was a famous TV commercial where the model says, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful." Do you find that maybe even now, in certain circles, it's taboo to make work that is beautiful?

JN: Yeah. I feel that, in a way, I'm trying to make something beautiful and failing. I find beauty really compelling-it makes me want to kind of puke in some ways. Well, I find the power of beauty very unsettling. And I think my paintings have that. In as much as they're beautiful, there's something unsettling about them. And maybe it's because I'm reaching for the kind of perfection of something . . . I'm reaching for the perfection of a movement or a moment . . . and that, you know, by its nature is reaching for beauty. But there's something about a moth to the flame about it for me. There's a kind of turbulence to the paintings, a kind of turbulent beauty.

GO: But I think what you're doing is tough because there is this kind of-

JN: Prejudice.

GO: Yes, because it used to be assumed that it was okay to make a beautiful painting.

JN: Yes.

GO: It was just part of the job, but it was part of the attack on painting, and on the idea of the decorative. I mean, I think that if you look at all the artists whose work you can say is clearly beautiful-it's not easy, it's harder.

JN: It's not easy to look at it?

GO: No, it's not easy for them to be accepted.

JN: I think there's some truth to that.

GO: I think that eventually it has to be accepted, but it's easy to dismiss some paintings that aim for beauty by saying, "Oh, that's decoration."

JN: I hope that my paintings are a bit more than that. Amy Taubin said something very nice in that piece that she wrote: that each of the paintings is a kind of search for a still place in the turbulence of one's life, and maybe there's a kind of beauty in stillness. I'd like to think that there's some sort of deeper beauty to the paintings than their lusciousness.

GO: Yeah, because your paintings are a lot about time—and about the beauty that’s always escaping. Like in nature, the flower hits that moment where from now on, it’s downhill all the way. So it’s kind of capturing the evanescent quality of beauty, that it’s just fleeting.

JN: Yes, that’s very nice, Glenn.

GO: But there are a lot of really great artists who I think have this ironic obstacle of beauty.

JN: Well, I spent many years trying to make sort of ugly things-

GO: You failed miserably at making ugly things, James.

JN: [laughs] I tried to make ugly music and I guess I failed. Even that was beautiful, too. You know, you just do what you do, and . . . I do think that in some respects, the surface beauty of my paintings is a lure, to grab you into maybe looking and thinking a little further, but it’s a sort of entrapment. I feel trapped by beauty, and maybe I try to use beauty as a trap in my own way. It’s sort of irresistible, beauty.

Repetition Compulsion

Amy Taubin on the films of James Nares

AMY TAUBIN
MAY 2008

Repetition Compulsion

AMY TAUBIN ON THE FILMS OF JAMES NARES

IN HIS 1977–78 SOLO PERFORMANCE *Desirium Probe*, James Nares became a television transmitter. The piece was performed twice, in downtown New York: once at Joan Jonas's Mercer Street loft, in 1977, and once at the Kitchen, on Wooster Street, in early 1978. Wearing headphones and white coveralls, Nares stood in a white room facing a television screen, with the audience seated behind it. In his hand was a remote control. For about four hours, he switched from station to station, channeling the words and sounds he heard through the headphones, which only he could hear. He stammered, muttered, sang, and occasionally shouted in a mad mimicry of news reports, sitcoms, dramas, commercials, theme music, as the flickering light from the screen bounced off his pale face and white-sheathed body, bathing the room in a radioactive glow. A physical and mental test of concentration and endurance, a sci-fi twist on "sampling" that predated the rise of the artist-DJ/VJ, an emotionally restrained version of speaking in tongues, a human physiological index of everything aired on TV during a particular evening before lower Manhattan was wired for cable, the seductively titled *Desirium Probe* was for many of the roughly two hundred people who saw it, including this writer, one of the most memorable performances of the decade. It was never documented on video, and the audiotape that Nares recorded during the performance disappeared years ago. All that remains is a single photograph.

At the time, Nares, who left London for New York in 1974 at age twenty-one, was best known as a filmmaker and as a musician. A member of James Chance's No Wave band the Contortions, and, slightly later, with Jim Jarmusch, Phil Kline, and Philippe Hagen, of the Del-Byzanteens, he was also part of the downtown artists' collective Colab and a cofounder of the short-lived New Cinema on St. Mark's Place in the East Village, where artist-filmmakers employed one of the earliest video projectors to show work shot and edited on Super 8 mm and then transferred to video (Super 8 being extremely difficult to project). Reviewing the series for the *SoHo Weekly News* in 1979, I wrote that the projector turned all the movies into a garish pink soup. Nares's contribution was *Rome '78*, in which various habitués of the Mudd Club (Eric Mitchell,



James Nares, *Pendulum*, 1976, still from a black-and-white film in Super 8 mm, 17 minutes.

What Nares has done for more than thirty years is repeatedly run a few potent, related ideas—about movement and stillness, ritual and improvisation, interior and exterior—through multiple media to define the particularities of each.

Lydia Lunch, David McDermott III), garbed in togas and clanking armor or, anachronistically, in lacy skivvies, camped their way through a Fall of Rome script for seventy-five tedious minutes.

An anomaly among the thirty-four films screening this month in "James Nares: Motion Pictures," a retrospective view of the artist's work on celluloid and video at Anthology Film Archives in New York, *Rome '78* is Nares's only narrative feature and probably his only dulling project in any medium. More's the pity, it's his best-known film. Last year, however, Nares restored roughly three dozen of the movies he made between 1975 and 2007, transferring the Super 8 films to 16 mm and the early video to more stable, DV formats. Since most of these pieces have never been publicly screened, it is understandable that those who became aware of Nares's work after 1981, when he turned his energies

almost entirely to painting, don't know that he makes movies, just as those who knew him as a filmmaker and musician in the '70s were largely unaware that he was also painting and making sculpture.

Nares is going public with his "motion pictures" at a moment when installations are hot and it seems as if every second gallery has videos running in a back room. His approach, however, to the relationships among various mediums of expression could not be further from the contemporary tendency toward multimedia mash-ups and circuslike spectacle. Indeed, *purity* is the term most typically invoked in discussions of his painting. What Nares has done for more than thirty years is repeatedly run a few potent, related ideas—about movement and stillness, ritual and improvisation, interior and exterior—through multiple media to define the particularities of each. His paintings, movies,



From top: James Nares, *Globe*, 2007, still from a color video, 43 minutes. James Nares, *Steel Rod*, 1976, still from a color film in Super 8 mm, 3 minutes. James Nares.

photographic and sculptural objects, and performances (musical and otherwise) are related—often paradoxically—to one another through these issues, as well as by certain recurrent images and by the traces left within each work of the performance involved in its making. Coming of age as an artist in the early '70s, he was influenced by the inscription of process in Minimal and Conceptual art. As his work developed, process was codified as performance.

Among the most haunting of Nares's films is the seventeen-minute, black-and-white *Pendulum* (1976). Suspended on a wire strung from a footbridge traversing a deserted Tribeca street, a heavy metal sphere swings back and forth, almost touching the pavement at the lowest point of its arc. Using a Super 8 camera, Nares filmed this jury-rigged, site-specific work, whose purpose was to transform a few city blocks into a movie set, from multiple angles, at both street level and above (looking down from the footbridge and from an enclosed bridge above it). At one point, he attached the camera to the sphere, thus switching from an "objective" to a "subjective" view—as if to depict what the sphere itself was "seeing." The tension in the

cable, straining under the weight of the ball, produced a groaning sound, which Nares amplified by attaching a microphone at a "harmonic point" on the wire, thus transforming the pendulum into a single-string musical instrument.

Pendulum, like several other of Nares's mid-'70s movies—*Hand Notes #2* (1975) and *Ramp, Steel Rod*, and *Poles* (all 1976)—was influenced by the films Richard Serra made in the late '60s, primarily *Hand Catching Lead* (1968). Both films depict a single, repeated action involving the effect of gravity on a heavy metal object. But the comparison stops there. *Pendulum* has a haunted lyricism, which has nothing to do with Serra's interests. The film evokes an anxiety dream: The entropic movement of the groaning pendulum, the claustrophobic effect of the industrial buildings lining the site on three sides, the slivers of sunlight penetrating the dust-laden air, even the occasionally glimpsed shadow of the filmmaker, suggest that something terrible has taken or is about to take place on this desolate street. Although *Pendulum*, like all of Nares's moving-image work, is best located within the history of avant-garde film, it also recalls one of the earliest great horror films, Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), with its looming shadows and climactic sound of a mill wheel grinding the flour that buries the vampire's henchman.

A similar sense of dread suffuses *Waiting for the Wind* (1982), a Super 8 color movie that compresses a three-act psychodrama into some seven minutes. The film opens with the camera careening up a winding stairway and through hallways that lead to an apartment door. We then see Nares on a bed, his attenuated, naked body restlessly stretching and contracting as it warding off bad dreams. The sheets begin to billow and twist, buffeted by invisible currents of energy whose source seems at once cosmic and psychical. Soon, objects begin to fall from the shelves, the furniture is hurled around the room, the walls shake and buckle. The film ends with a series of fast, repeated zooms from the open window toward the full moon. In *Waiting for the Wind*, the crisis manifested is existential—the meeting of inner and outer forces that elude the control of the subject (Nares), thereby wrecking his mind and body and trashing his life.

It's not irrelevant that the film was made right around the time that Nares began to devote most of

his energies to painting. One can see, in all his paintings, the attempt to find within the tumult a still point. As his painting developed, the still point became an extended moment of equilibrium, reflected in a single undulating, sometimes twisting brushstroke stretched nearly the length of the canvas on which it is made. Nares, who refers to himself as a mad gadgeteer, makes his brushes himself, just as he made the riggings for *Pendulum* and even devised a special lens for his 2007 video *Globe*. He also designed a painting table that enables him to immediately "erase" a brushstroke and start anew on the same canvas. Most of the paintings are the result of multiple successive attempts, just as Hollywood movies involve multiple takes of almost every shot. When he works on very large paintings, Nares suspends himself over the canvas using a stuntman's harness. The details of this ritualized performance are not apparent in the paintings—you would have to know about them to find their traces. What is evidenced, however, is duration. The ribbons of paint are ribbons of time, and one "reads" them from top to bottom or left to right as one reads a movie from beginning to end. And in certain of the paintings, something else is indexed as well. One sees not only the shape of the gesture made by body/arm/brush but, more mysteriously, something that resembles a photograph or multiple photographs of an arm—specifically, the forearm that is the "star" of two of Nares's most sensuous and tactile films, *Block* (1976) and *Cloth* (1998). What confluence of movement, brush, and paint could have imprinted not only the gesture but also an image of the body that made it onto the canvas? Nares has remarked that movies are not the thing they represent—they are haunted by the reality that is absent on the screen—whereas paintings are what they are. But if one spends enough time with Nares's paintings to get beyond their elegance and presence, one sees that they are haunted in ways that are even more complicated.

In 2001, the artist suffered a severe aneurysm. During his recovery, he became familiar with various tests used to assess brain function. He reproduced one of them in *Primary Function* (2007), a movie as torturous, absurd, and revelatory of one's own desire for "wholeness" as *Desirium Probe*. Nares's "Motion Pictures" will tear you apart and put you back together all at once. □

"James Nares: Motion Pictures" will be on view at Anthology Film Archives in New York from May 16 through May 22.

AMY TAUBIN IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF FILM COMMENT AND SIGHT & SOUND.

The New York Times

James Nares

GRACE GLUECK

MARCH 9, 2001

James Nares

Paul Kasmin Gallery

293 10th Avenue, at 27th Street

Chelsea

Through March 17

Using oversize brushes that he makes himself, Mr. Nares lays down a single gestural stroke of color on a blazing white canvas. Each giant stroke, resonant with a color like deep mustard, bright blue or plummy cerise, makes a vibrant, wriggly bolt of energy across or down the surface, splattering drops and leaving trails of paint as it goes.

Announcing the sinewy adeptness of the artist's hand and wrist, the twists and turns of the strokes are a virtuoso performance, almost like advanced swordplay. They suggest the intricacies of Japanese calligraphy, too. With it all, they are also a little cartoony, inevitably evoking the giant brush stroke paintings made by Roy Lichtenstein in the mid-1960's.

As a tour de force of brushwork in outsize scale, their mission is accomplished. GRACE GLUECK

Art in America

James Nares

MAURA REILLY
DECEMBER 1999

James Nares at Paul Kasmin

In his recent exhibition of works from 1999, James Nares again showcased his talents as a gestural-abstractionist extraordinaire. Having moved away from his figure-eight work of the 1980s and the "Luminographs" of the early '90s, Nares is now manufacturing works with a more distilled, sleek calligraphic style. Despite the shift in style, however, he continues to explore the same issues: movement, gesture and surface.

Nares staples his canvases to the floor or lays them flat on a table, then covers them with a smooth, opalescent gray priming ground. Then, using long-handled broom brushes that he designs himself, he mops thinned-out oil paint onto each canvas in a single, swooping gesture. This action is performed swiftly, without conscious premeditation. After assessing the result, Nares invariably erases the mark with a squeegee, and begins again, varying the rhythm and speed of the brush until he arrives at the consummate gesture. The result is a large, highly stylized brushstroke which seems to hover on the pale field.

In a work titled *Jack*, a long, pea green, swirling stroke twists and gnarls its way down and off the 9-by-2-foot vertical painting. *Take 'Em to Missouri*, another vertical-format work, contains a rust-colored brushstroke that sweeps downward, zigzagging

the length of the canvas from top left to bottom right, leaving splatters in its wake.

The results of Nares's trial-and-error approach to painting vary moderately. Each canvas displays one elongated gesture in a single color, with the color, size and configuration of the mark being the only variants. Sometimes the canvases are arranged in groups of three or four, such as *I Stand Up Next to a Mountain*, a large work (9 by 7 feet), made up of four narrow, vertical elements, each containing a single, sinuous brushstroke in neon blue which emerges from the top of the canvas and spirals downward, stopping just short of the bottom edge. The multiple-panel works such as this one are the more successful of the lot because the groupings create complex interactions of choreographic rhythms.

When looking at Nares's work, one is tempted to compare it to David Reed's "photographic" paint strokes and to Roy Lichtenstein's Pop parodies of the Abstract-Expressionist gesture. Yet such comparisons detract from Nares's otherworldly, oddly disembodied, feathery forms. Insofar as his gestures epitomize a controlled spontaneity, Nares's new paintings are visual paradoxes. Like Boccioni's striding figure in bronze whose clothing flutters in the wind, these works manage miraculously to freeze movement itself in paint. —Maura Reilly



James Nares: *So Things Go*, 1999, oil on linen, 80 by 25 inches; at Paul Kasmin.

The New York Times

James Nares

KEN JOHNSON

APRIL 16, 1999

James Nares

Paul Kasmin Gallery

74 Grand Street

Soho

Through April 24

James Nares produces a suave spin on that modernist archetype, the big brush stroke. Each canvas by this New York painter bears a single, vivid stroke made all at once with a giant brush. Unlike a brush stroke by, say, Franz Kline, these are strangely disembodied: they are literally big brush strokes, but they also look like illusory images of big brush strokes. In dark primary colors on opalescent gray grounds, the satiny, luminous strokes twist sinuously in space or swirl agitatedly with jagged, feathery edges. Mr. Nares makes one per canvas and joins similar vertical panels into groups of three or four, creating choreographic rhythms.

This emblem of Dionysian freedom is produced by a painstaking process of trial and error. Using homemade, broom-handled brushes, Mr. Nares mops liquid paint onto canvas on the floor in a single, sweeping application. He considers the result and then, usually, wipes it away and tries again. It may require a hundred or more tries to arrive at the perfect effect of spontaneous fluidity.

Related to the cartoon brush strokes of Roy Lichtenstein and the sleek, near-photographic strokes of David Reed, Mr. Nares's images can be read as Pop style parodies of an exhausted cliché. But the strokes also seem mysteriously animated, as though they were manifestations of some transcendental energy. They dance a fine line between irony and romance.

KEN JOHNSON

ELLE

JAMES NARES

The intergenre experimentalist of the '70s has become an eloquent practitioner of abstract painting

DAVID RIMANELLI / PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD ERBLE
DECEMBER/JANUARY 1996

JAMES NARES

The intergenre experimentalist of the '70s has become an
eloquent practitioner of abstract painting

In many ways, in both his art and his life, the artist James Nares exemplifies certain transformations indigenous to New York's turbulent art world. Born in London in 1953, Nares has lived in New York since 1974 and has been a near constant in the motley downtown scene, making his mark in painting, sculpture, music, photography, and film, as well as in New York's densely imbricated social strata. Throughout his career, Nares has remained surprisingly resilient, indifferent to the gossip that accrues around almost any artist of note. "People are probably more interested in my sex life than in the way I make my paintings," he sardonically remarks. "I suppose anyone who spends much time in New York and gets anything out of the experience necessarily has a checkered career. The great thing about New York is you can always reappear: even after you think you've burned all your bridges or completely destroyed yourself, most people are more than willing to give you a second chance."

To describe the New York of the mid-'70s as a different world is an understatement. For one thing, as far as the rest of the planet was concerned, New York was more or less dead, teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Much of the city below 14th Street remained terra incognita, a cluster of obscure, raw, verminous neighborhoods—quite the contrary of the Disneyesque tourist trap that "Downtown" has since become. And yet, perhaps because it was cheap, this labyrinth of tenements and deserted industrial spaces proved a suitable home to New York's last thriving avant-garde.

As the glitz of Studio 54 epitomized late-'70s decadence for the world at large, Steve Mass's Mudd Club, located in Tribeca—then pretty much the bowels of Manhattan—bred an even weirder art, music, sex, and drug scene. "I guess you could say I was a fixture at the Mudd Club even before it officially opened," Nares recalls. "I once ▶





Above: James Nares at work in his Manhattan studio. Facing page: *Untitled*, 1995; oil and enamel on canvas.

ART

appeared in the centerfold of the London magazine *Time Out* as a representative, or embodiment, of the Mudd Club. I did a performance piece there that Steve Mass wanted to take on the road, but doing it once was enough for me."

The mood of radical, even hostile desublimation that the Mudd Club fostered also encouraged an almost hallucinatory blurring of the boundaries between art and life—a historic goal of the avant-garde, but pursued here without recourse to self-conscious manifestos. The only thing crazier than art was life. As the Nadar of that scene, photographer Nan Goldin, recalls: "We were young, thin, and drugs were still a good time." In such environs, Goldin took some of her first New York photographs, Gary Indiana penned his early plays, *Phantoms of Louisiana* and *The Roman Polanski Story*, Lydia Lunch spewed punk vitriol, and Nares played guitar in the seminal no-wave band the Contortions, as well as in the more obscure Del-Byzanteens, with Jim Jarmusch. His artwork included cast-concrete balls resembling pendulums, as well as figurative paintings, in which the brushstroke remained preeminent. Nares also co-founded Collaborative Projects, Inc.—famously known as Colab—and worked on a number of underground films and videos. His best-known Super 8 film, *Rome '78*, featured such fixtures of the demimonde as Lunch, John Lurie, and David McDermott playing hysterical, power-crazed egomaniacs in a deliriously ignoble imperial Rome.

Nourished in this atmosphere of intergenre experimentation, Nares has emerged in the '90s as an eloquent exponent of that typically ossified mode: abstract painting. Referring to his former artistic diversification, he explains that "there is something in everything I've done that connects to my painting. There's a cinematic element, there's a musical element. I've concentrated on painting since 1982, but I've only recently achieved a kind of painterly distillation."

In a sense, his explorations of the Mudd Club and other venues were in fact years of apprenticeship, a kind of hectic, protracted adolescence that laid the ground for the mature artist. "Maybe it's just that I'm getting older," Nares says, "but I no longer feel the compulsion to chase after every glittering thing I see. I used to decide, 'I wanna be



Top: The backgrounds Nares prepares for his brushstrokes hang on a wall near the platform on which he paints. **Above:** Nares makes his own brushes. "If I could purchase the brushes I needed," he says, "I'd be the happiest artist." See Resources.

in a rock 'n' roll band, I wanna make a movie.' After a long experimental phase, I began to strip away everything that wasn't really mine, and what became the focus was my painting."

During the last few years, Nares has elaborated a system of painting that might be characterized as a grammar, or syntax, of the individual brushstroke: it involves a panoply of references while retaining a precise, local character. Nares's looping, curvaceous strokes recall the poetic scribbles of Henri Michaux, the grandiosity of Abstract Expressionism, or the controlled graphics

of Chinese calligraphy. At the same time, Nares distances his practice from the notion of pure, unmediated expressivity; in this way, his paintings bring to mind Gerhard Richter's coolly cerebral abstractions. Nares attempts to approximate a paradox in his painting, striving for an effect that is at once calculated and impulsive, the product of rote repetition as well as instantaneous and decisive action. Laying the canvas flat, he uses a brush of his own making ("I only make them because I have to," he says. "If I could purchase the brushes I needed, I'd be the happiest artist") to execute a bold, over-size mark in a single movement.

Stepping back from the painting, he then assesses the quality of this apparently spontaneous gesture; more often than not, he doesn't like the result and wipes away the paint. Nares repeats the process until he judges the effect successful. "My procedure is instantaneous, but it's also narrative and sequential," he explains. "In that way, it resembles photography or cinema as much as typical gestural abstraction. At the same time, the precise sequence of moves I execute over and over again in making the painting becomes a kind of dance."

Nares is now painting new works on paper for a January show at New York's Paul Kasmin Gallery. His output is both decorous and exciting, preserving artistic integrity while adapting to the constraints of an art world that is radically different from the one he entered some 20 years ago. His is a '90s story: the volatile experimenter of yore has matured into an assured, self-conscious practitioner of the most traditional of artistic mediums; the urban nightcrawler of the Mudd Club is now a paragon of domesticity. (Nares lives with his wife of one year, the novelist Ameena Meer, and her daughter from a previous marriage; their first child is on the way.)

"A while back, I went into seclusion for about two years," Nares recalls. "It was a particularly focused period—a lot that was fragmentary in my painting seemed to come together then. I lived in a tiny, isolated house way out on Long Island, near Montauk. When I returned, I hooked up with Ameena." Although the painter declines to elaborate on the reason for his retreat, one suspects it must have functioned as a kind of purgation, from which he could return to enjoy *la vita nuova*. ★

BOMB

James Nares

GLENN O'BRIEN
SUMMER 1996

"There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous. He must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible. These artists must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere.

The resulting pictures lack the complex composition and textures of ordinary painting, but it is said that those who see well find something captured that escapes explanation.

This conviction that direct deed is the most meaningful reflection, I believe, has prompted the evolution of the extremely severe and unique disciplines of the jazz or improvising musician." — Bill Evans, Improvisation in Jazz

James Nares played in a band or two, but today his improvisations are usually solos and they take place on canvas or paper. But the art he practices is very much akin to the art of musical improvisation, as described by master musician Bill Evans. It is an art perfectly trained, disciplined and rigorous in its improvisation. It is an art with roots in the Japanese techniques cited by Evans and in the exquisite classical jazz stream which Evans himself navigated by stellar reckoning.

As popular music has become more and more a matter of rote and superficial fashion, the deep music of musicians like Evans, Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Thelonius Monk seems even more precious and magical. And in painting and the visual arts a similar erosion of craft and a marketing-driven dismissal of tradition have resulted in a facile, fashion-trend practice of art, leaving us few practitioners of the difficult and sublime.

The work of James Nares, however, has evolved in one continuous stroke over nearly 20 years, without concern for "movements," acquiring a mastery of movement, of rhythm, harmony and gesture that speaks directly to the conscious without the mediation of context.

It's hard to practice a rigorous, classical, independent art today, but the results achieved by Nares are serenely profound and crucially beautiful.

— Glenn O'Brien

The New York Times

Art in Review

Where the brush rules

ROBERTA SMITH
FEBRUARY 24, 1995

James Nares

Paul Kasmin Gallery
74 Grand Street
SoHo
Through March 4

James Nares understands that if you're going to be a one-note painter, the least you can do is develop perfect pitch. He is becoming expert at his specialty: broad, calligraphic brush strokes, usually no more than three or four to a painting, in transparent tones of blue, red or yellow or a sharp white oil that suggest ink. These strokes twist and turn, furl and unfurl their way across canvases palely tinted by wiped-out previous attempts, creating fat serpentine incidents of suspended liquidity and gesture.

Mr. Nares's precedents are clear and tend toward the ironic: Lichtenstein's big Pop Art brush strokes of the mid-1960's, and also Gerhard Richter's weirdly photographic ones from a decade later. He brings to the table an unexpected, almost Zen-like purity, sincere because it is so evidently concentrated and skilled.

The danger in all this is that he might become the next Paul Jenkins — that is, slickly bravuristic and monotonous. The saving grace, in addition to the scale and simplicity, is that Mr. Nares paints with breathtaking ease, but without making it look easy. **ROBERTA SMITH**

Art in America

James Nares at Paul Kasmin

RICHARD KALINA

JUNE 1993

James Nares at Paul Kasmin

James Nares's new paintings speak to contemporary abstraction's continuing fascination with the isolation and depersonalization of the autographic gesture. The golden age of Abstract Expressionism is long gone, but that doesn't prevent the gestural from making its claim. For many artists, gesture is no longer embedded in the same pictorial and referential structures from which it drew its original authority. Rather than being the basis for a dynamic compositional system or a clearly labeled marker of the psyche, it has become increasingly autonomous.

Nares's work is inherently contradictory: it is distanced and calculated in its conception and allusive effect, but in its execution it is emphatically direct and visceral. Nares takes a fine muslin canvas, staples it to the floor and covers it with a smooth, virtually frictionless priming ground. He then takes thinned-out black oil paint, and with a very large flexible brush of his own making lays down in one shot an oversized, bold calligraphic mark or series of marks. This is done without conscious thought and very quickly—frequently in under a second. The spontaneous effort is then judged by the artist, and most often it is found unacceptable. Something is off: his balance was wrong, his attention flagged, the mark in some subtle way fell short. If this was the case then the paint is immediately squeegeed off and the action repeated for as many times as it takes until he gets it right. The results vary in form from the largely vertical single stroke of *Prescript III* to the long diagonal sweep of *Prescript VI* to the smaller broken marks of *Prescript I*.

The false starts do not disappear completely. Although wiped away, the warmly toned black paint stays in the weave and creates a kind of brownish



James Nares: *Prescript III*, 1993, oil on canvas, 65 by 49½ inches; at Paul Kasmin.

gray atmosphere. The sepia tonalities and the smooth surface give the paintings a strong photographic feeling—they have the look of platinum prints or photogravure. The association with photography serves to distance the gesture (are we looking at an original object or at a mechanical reproduction?), and it also gives the painting some of the authority we accord photography as a truthful recorder of the real world. It should be noted as well that Nares's gestural process takes not much longer to accomplish than a photograph takes to be exposed.

Nares's work evokes a range of earlier art: from the torque and chiaroscuro of the Baroque, to Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, up through Surrealism and the painterly choreographies of Jackson Pollock. I find the Surrealist thread of particular interest. The sense of a mysterious and somewhat ominous object floating in space,

combined with the strokes' disembodied quality (they seem like shocks of hair) gives the paintings an uncanniness and a suppressed erotic charge, a welcome edge of humor and wariness. Nares's paintings are clearly flamboyant efforts, but they go beyond a mere display of physical and emotional fine tuning. They address, in a nicely oblique way, some of the pressing concerns of abstract painting today.

—Richard Kalina

BOMB

James Nares by Betsy Sussler

BETSY SUSSLER

APRIL 1, 1989



James Nares. ©1988 by Kate Simon. All photographs courtesy of Michael Klein.

James Nares's studio has high airy windows which look out over the Bowery. It is filled with opaque discs and wing shapes; forms he uses as reliefs in his paintings. We talked, late one afternoon in January with the sun pouring in, through twilight, just into the night.

Betsy Sussler: Your works seem to be in a state of arrested motion—somewhere between inertia and dreaming, or sensuality and violence.

James Nares: Even if they're not moving, they imply altered states of motion. Curiously enough, I found that the large black painting, *Light Seed*, which most obviously implied motion and activity was the least kinetic; because the lenses were locked in a fixed position. Their wad was shot whereas the others were loosely stacked and remained primed.



James Nares, *Light Seed*, 1988, pigment and hydra stone, 84 × 72 inches.

BS: The lenses are . . .

JN: Different grades of convex discs from hydra stone, a casting stone, which I use to construct the paintings—like petrified lenses I stack them in sequence as an analogue to motion pictures.

BS: You made a film; a cement sphere rolling down a ramp . . .

JN: In 1976, with Tim Burns. A concrete ball rolling under its own volition and the force of gravity down one of those ramps off the old West Side Highway. Letting it roll. A lot of these objects refer to natural forces light, gravity, electricity—there's a kind of metaphysics at work.

BS: I saw your woodcut of the unicorn you did for Brad Morrow's *Bestiary* book.

JN: “. . . looking at its reflection in the pond, and wondering if it really exists . . .” It was the only mythological creature in the book.

BS: *The Owl* was written as if it were.

JN: *The Owl* was the next one I chose, and *The Starling*. The starling because it's a mass of animals all acting like one; when they fly, they do so as one organism, all turning at the same time. And there's no leader; it's this democracy of vision not unlike the making of the lenses. According to the poet Holderlin, the sense of a lens is of life questioning or interrogating the sky.



James Nares, Detail: *Light Seed*.

BS: They're cast from the same mold?

JN: Yes, very promiscuously.

BS: I've seen forms in your drawings that look as if they come from motifs in nature.

JN: I try to embody the nature and combine forms—it's like one and one making three—to expose a metaphor of some kind. It's searching for metaphors, for likeness, like a breeding ground. It seems to me, that that's how a language develops. Everything breeds through metaphors. I think of the lenses as seeds. Indeed, the word lens comes from the word lentil. Once I have the epistemological base for metaphor, the pieces just happen in the same way that a pun might occur. It doesn't make sense but it makes sense. It can seem flippant and facile but it can work the other way as well and reveal hidden truths. There's something about the irreverence [sic] of the pun which frees the spirit, makes nonsense out of meaning. I try to encourage those kind of events. It's almost as if the objects breed themselves. They get together and they . . .

BS: They procreate.

JN: Yes, and something comes out of it. Although, sometimes I wonder if these things make me, or if I make them.

BS: But you still gather them.

JN: I just show up . . .

BS: ...to receive them.

JN: I can't remember when I first came upon it. I have cast clear ones. Do you see them, in the window, prisms and lenses? To me, they're objects of transformation, the transformation [sic] of physical properties—which is analogous to a transformation of the internal world. With a lens or a prism, it's the literal remodeling of light.

BS: And yet these other lenses are all opaque; the light is contained, hidden.

JN: In a way yes. The first piece was completely black. There were 38 lenses and it was called *38 Blind*. The other objects, forms, these wing shapes, have to do with the transformation of air into flight. Flight is a recurring [sic] motif. There's a sort of neutrality to these objects. They are like simple tools. It's not uncommitted—but there's a neutral presence. There's no moral binder.

BS: Yes, but implicit in the making is its participation in life, it seems to me. What's that beautiful shape that looks like a magic wand over there?

JN: That's, a curious one. I'm attracted to it; it's very beautiful, but it's also poisonous. It's lead. I think of it as a river, a delta staff with artesian properties. It's very female; it's like a certain kind of woman to me.

BS: What certain kind of woman?

JN: The femme-fatale.

BS: Have you studied fauna, botany? *(laughter)* You have such a feel for those shapes.

JN: No, but I read a lot of . . . different kinds of books. The things I get the most from, in terms of my work, are books which are raw information. Raw information is untainted in the way that it can be thrown together, fertilized, and allowed to generate.

BS: There is always the sign of your hand, touch . . .

JN: Certainly, after the eye; touch, hearing, rhythm is important to me as well, but that sense of touch is something that delights me. To me, intimacy has a very important role in the work, in that it's the intimacies which everyone can understand. If I'm looking for a common language with which to communicate, that common language has to do with intimacies and emotions.

BS: And is that dependent upon touch?

JN: Not necessarily, but for me, it is. I experience the world through rhythms, like a comedian or an actor—timing is . . .

BS: . . . Everything. (*laughter*) But yours is more of a visual timing. When the color stops, when the shape changes, is a more concrete, visceral . . .

JN: Yes, there is a rhythm in the image, there's also a rhythm in the making of it, the activity. I can hear the paintings. There is a film of Picasso drawing on a piece of glass in the reverse, and the beauty of it was that you could hear the work being made CRICCK, chli, chli, chli, the sounds I hear sounds when I work, (*Brushstrokes?*) No, music, sounds... For me it's absolutely essential. One of the things that I have to do, as an artist, is clear the channels and let it happen. If I start to think that it's me making it. I'm in trouble. I think it's very presumptuous to think that I was responsible for it, fundamentally. This is tricky territory.

BS: Your work has always had thread, a sameness, which has to do with your touch. And yet, in this wonderfully uninhibited way, it's always been able to change, drastically. I saw *Haunted Summer* last night. It's a fiction about Shelley and Byron, but it uses some of their texts. Byron says, "The only thing eternal is change."—I'd been thinking about the word chameleon in relation to your work. I'll read this to you. "A small lizard-like creature distinguished by . . . their power of changing the color of the skin through varying shades of yellow, red, gray, brown, and dull inky blue. From their inanimate appearance, and power of existing for long periods without food, they were formerly supposed to live on *air*."

JN: What a lovely creature. As far as changing and adapting, that's one of the basic tenets of survival for any creature. It could also mean to be a little windblown and uprooted, which I've been in my life: but as an artist, I have to follow those callings, check them out and resolve them. Sometimes it's resolved very quickly, on just a little piece of paper and other times it takes a series of paintings. I like that chameleon, it's like the bamboo, which is my favorite plant. it bends; it has some give to it. What a supremely spiritual creature, that he survives on air. Air is very tangible, as tangible as objects. (*turning on a light*) Does that blind you, that light?

BS: If I look into it.

JN: Let's keep it dark.

BS: Yes, I like this twilight.

JN: I'd like to talk about my last show in a way which refers to my work as a whole; which is my sense of history and it tying in to the past. I'm totally drawn by the past, drawn back in time. Henri Michaux talks about the poet's job being to feel his way, blindfolded along the golden thread that finds its way inexorably [sic] back in time; to return with what he finds.

BS: The shapes that look like found objects—the fossils.

JN: Yes, that stuff draws me back, in the same way physicists search for the beginnings of things, or anthropologists search for where we come from. Those kinds of questions which in a sense, are rather ludicrous, pointless questions to ask.

BS: Well, they're so grand, it seems you can't get to them. So you start in smaller places.

JN: To resolve the present I have to look backwards, in terms of discovering who I am. I'm thinking about interior work: looking back at yourself, human past, knowledge—wherever the hell we come from. In my last show, the piece with the glass shelf and the blue TV screens alternating with clear lenses is called *Scarab*. The Egyptians thought the scarab beetle pushed the sun through the sky. He saw the scarab beetle rolling its ball of dung in front of it and so the scarab became the sacred creature that for all intents and purposes pushed the sun through the sky. And I'm sure the Egyptian mind believed that . . . I was going to call the piece *Suspicion*. Because while I thought the TVs looked like scarabs—there is much suspicion among most thinking people concerning the use of television, for instance, the dubious broadcasting of the news. And the lens was treated with suspicion when it first came out. Spectacle makers were regarded as being distorters of the truth. It was considered to be interfering with God's work. Philosophically, the Church regarded the whole idea of the lens revealing deeper truths about the universe by exposing things that are so small and making them big enough to see, or allowing us to get close to things that were so far away—with fear and disdain. And to complete the cycle in that piece of work, the idea of the scarab pushing the sun through the sky is certainly treated with suspicion by contemporary us.

BS: And the wing shapes, standing vertically?

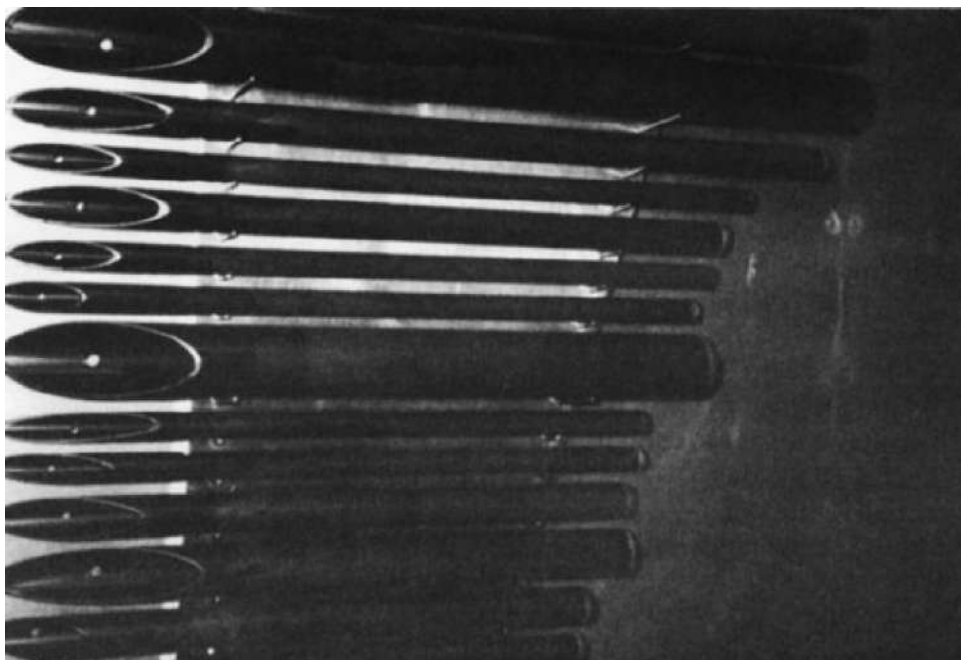
JN: As in air foils. *The Adena* has one wing or foil like a digit on the hand there are five wings, each one corresponding to a finger. There was a tribe of American Indians whose last known trace is the 5th or 6th century, BC . . . after that these people just disappeared off the face of the earth, which is something that intrigues me. The only extant record of this entire tribe are these images of men with their hands turned into wings.

BS: You are attracted to things that no longer exist?

JN: I'm intrigued by mystery—I'm attracted to things that aren't what they seem to be. I really don't believe in permanence; I'm very aware of the fragility of our existence. And I certainly believe in man's ability to totally obliterate another culture without regret. I wanted to pay tribute to . . . so that's *The Adena*. The next wing piece, *The Sound*, is seven foils standing vertically, which plays on the idea of sound coming (*James picks up a tuning fork and claps it*) from the displacement of air. I made it in Long Island over the summer; and it looks like those sailboats off of Long Island Sound. Kind of a joke.

BS: A resonant pun, or a resident pun.

JN: And then the big black painting. *Seeds of Light*: seeds of knowledge, the staple seed—a spiritual sustenance and nutrient—light. The big white painting, *Plow*, alludes to the idea of planting light into darkness, planting knowledge into the pigments: the lens, seeds, knowledge—used as a tool to churn the earth. The silver metallic painting with the horizontal copper quills. *The Inoculations*, is another of my hybrid objects which is a cross between a pen and a sword, a hypodermic syringe. Literally it's a cooper pipe that I cut at an angle and put an eye shaped oval into. Inoculation translates literally into "inoculare—to put an eye into."



James Nares, *Inoculations*, 1988, aluminum and copper, 84 x 72 inches.

BS: Grating metaphors.

JN: It's like grafting, exactly, which implies a new branch of life; the capillary feed; in the pen paralleling the capillary drinking action in the tree. So, inoculation. Inoculation against disease. By seeing, by putting an eye into it, we immunize ourselves against its destructive power.

BS: Once a revelation has taken place...

JN: Yes. Also, they were dipped in ink—the ink on the pen is the same as...

BS: ...The blood on the sword...

JN: ...or the immunizing fluids, or the sexual juices. When you graft, you shove it into the tree and you paint it with bitumen to seal it, like wounding and healing.

Art in America

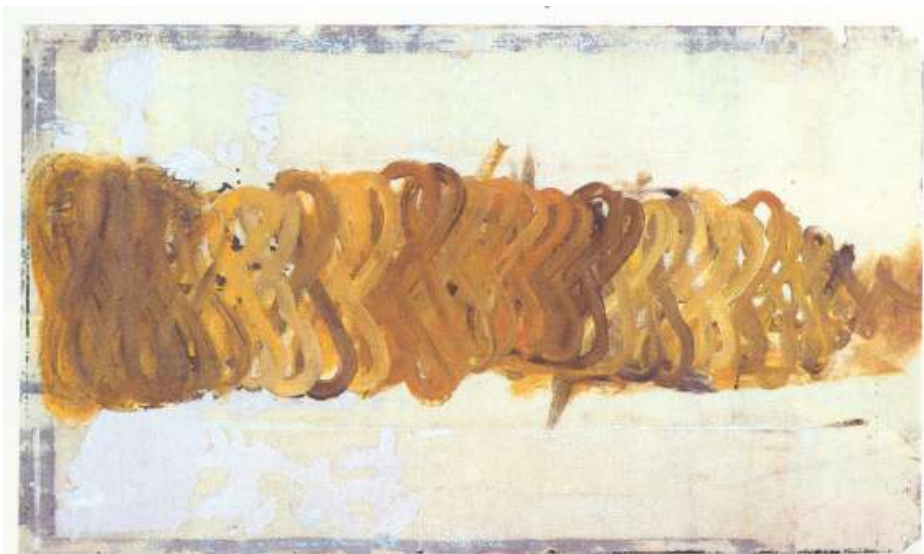
James Nares at Cable Gallery

GARY INDIANA
NOVEMBER 1984

James Nares at Cable Gallery

James Nares's recent show at Cable Gallery was a surprise ending for a season heavily infested with barbarisms and simulations of "media reality" in livid color: Nares's work is a throwback to painting as an expressive medium, and his pictures hold the eye the way a great dancer does, with a graceful defiance of gravity. One of Nares's specialties is a thick translucent line that contains a plenum of optical drama within its margins, so that even his most minimally linear pictures have full, intricately detailed inner lives.

Nares's paintings typically contain networks of imagery with abundant space around them; many are painted on skins of silk stretched over metal panels or canvas. The pictures don't necessarily float on these surfaces, but they do occupy the ground with a perceptible lightness. Nares is obsessed with the specific weight of a picture, with the dialectic between the weight of materials and the weight of images. He often uses metal instead of canvas, and lately has been painting scrolls on thin sheets of lead. The interest in weight and lightness is clear in the compositional rhetoric of these pictures: figures are sometimes arranged in directional opposition to each other or spin on a visual centrifuge. An anthropomorphic rabbit figure in *Second Painting* is squarely centered, but the figure's arm grasps its lower torso as if pulling on a lever, tensing the outstretched legs to create the effect of an arrested flywheel mechanism. *Faking Down* has interdigitating ochre figure eights snaking across its middle surrounded by neutral light ground; "the evidence of the hand" is the didactic reason for this painting, yet what it most forcefully demonstrates is the gross physicality of color, in this case manipulated against its natural tendency to sink into the ground.



James Nares: *Faking Down*, 1984,
oil on canvas, 42 by 71½ inches; at Cable.

There's no illusional space absorbing Nares's markings and figures, but no impression of flatness either. One feels that these pictures made their way into the artist's mind well in advance of their appearance on the canvas and were laid down in meticulous, single strokes—nothing rubbed out and restarted, everything simply there to begin with. Or that Nares has a remarkably unsloppy form of spontaneity. In either event, he has avoided the banalities of narrative, allegory and metaphor to the degree that his pictures are themselves worlds, objects of sensuous transparency that neither bray with message nor clobber with obviousness.

—Gary Indiana