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Capsule Art Reviews: *Damascus Gate* (*Stretch Variation III*), "Howard Sherman: When gorillas shoot pigs", "Jon Pylypchuk", "Josephine Meckseper"

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Damascus Gate (Stretch Variation III) It's big, it's bright, it's art-historically important, and it's at the MFAH. Frank Stella's epic, 50-foot painting *Damascus Gate (Stretch Variation III)* (1970) is billed as the last in his "Protractor" series. Stella broke onto the art scene in the late 1950s with the stark lines of his "Black Paintings." He went on to introduce color into those lines, and the shaped canvases that he used define the curves of the "Protractor" series. In *Damascus Gate*, Stella, influenced by the geometric patterns of Islamic art, flirts with the decorative. Today Stella does more than flirt with the decorative — his work has deteriorated into what amounts to corporate interior decoration. *Damascus Gate* could be billed as the last painting Stella made before his art jumped the shark. Through March 31. The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Cullinan Hall, 1001 Bissonnet, 713-639-7300. — **KK**

Subject(s):

[Damascus Gate \(Stretch Variation III\)](#), ["Howard Sherman: When gorillas shoot pigs"](#), ["Jon Pylypchuk"](#), ["Josephine Meckseper"](#)

"Howard Sherman: When gorillas shoot pigs" Howard Sherman returns to McMurtrey Gallery with another set of explosive canvases, and this time he's taking on the economy! (Sort of.) Sherman's previous show at McMurtrey seemed preoccupied with the sex industry and the urban underbelly, but this time his subjects feel more abstract and nefarious. Of course, all we have to go on really are Sherman's always-titillating titles, like *Trust me my instruments are sterile* and *Pussy fever*, but this time he's also included ones like *Revision as a form of lying* and *Everyone else is temporary*, a sign that Sherman is clearly embracing,

more than before, his work's abstract nature and trusting the power of his imagery. Familiar

motifs like little syringes are back, but tiny debit MasterCards also pepper these paintings, especially in works like *Social capital means nothing here* and *The banker*. Sherman's use of spray paint and splatter reinforce an urban environment, and he's playing around with trompe l'oeil, too, transforming acrylic paint into paper and masking tape — watch for the places where Sherman "tags" his own paintings. Sherman's love of bright fluorescence seems restrained here, though. *Death of the linear narrative*, for example, feels uncharacteristically drained of color. A thick, black, vertical zigzag dominates the canvas, surrounded by bleached-out pastels and an "x-ed out" shape with teeth-like stalactites. It's the most confident piece in a set of confidently enigmatic and playful works — perhaps symbolic of Sherman's new direction and steady rise. Through November 28. 3508 Lake, 713-523-8238. — **TS**

"Jon Pylypchuk" A mutant frog head with bug eyes grows out of a small metal paint bucket. It's placed on the floor to greet you as you first walk in the door of the Blaffer Gallery. Crafted from green expandable foam with eyes made from felt scraps, it's kind of creepy, kind of sad, kind of funny and kind of cute, and it sets the tone for Jon Pylypchuk's show. Pylypchuk is a Canadian artist and former member of the goofball artist collective Royal Art Lodge. Curated by Blaffer director and chief curator Claudia Schmuckli, the exhibition "Jon Pylypchuk" surveys ten years of the artist's paintings, sculptures and drawings. Pylypchuk's world is populated with strange, cobbled-together animal characters. And he's got some of the best titles around — they're dialogue between the characters in his work, and the artist often writes them out next to the figures in his paintings and drawings. In *cut the act you phony cripple/you try living with your legs bent up* (2005), two pathetic-looking figures confront each other. Their stuffed bodies are crafted from mangy fake fur that looks like it was ripped from some third-grader's snot-and-grime-encrusted winter parka. A striped cat-like figure on stick legs points a stick arm accusingly at a dog-like figure in a wheeled cart using sticks to propel himself. The creepy/cuddly thing is at work here, too. If anything could be described as warmly abject, it is Pylypchuk's art. Through November 14. 120 Fine Arts Building, 713-743-9530. — **KK**

"Josephine Meckseper" German artist Josephine Meckseper's work upstairs at Blaffer Gallery is billed as engaging "leftist theories and politics in a consumerist reality." In "Josephine Meckseper," curated by Cynthia Woods Mitchell Curatorial Fellow Rachel Hooper, the artist presents a mixture of objects — protest signs, ads, mannequins, plastic-wrapped toilet brushes, a plastic menorah — on the shelves, racks and display cases used in retail. She collages ads onto abstract paintings and attaches bathtub chains to other paintings, hanging them from a clothing rack, ready for sale. Black-and-white stars and stripes are painted on the walls. Meckseper's also thrown in a grainy black-and-white 16mm film, transferred to video shown on a laptop sitting on the shelf, of an Iraq war protest march that looks Vietnam-vintage. Looking at the mix of items, you can get the gist of what the artist is going for, but I'm sure the picture in Meckseper's head is much clearer than anything the viewer is going to take away from the exhibition. But it's Meckseper's single-channel video projection in the other gallery that really steals the show. She sets the stage for it nicely; to get to it, you walk down a "patriotic" red-carpeted hall with a blue wall. A mirrored panel hangs on the wall. It's silkscreened with a photo of John McCain, an image of a geriatric walker, the infamous Blackwater logo and the text "No Country for Old Men." The piece also reflects and implicates the viewer. Through November 14. The Blaffer Gallery, 120 Fine Arts Building, 713-743-9530. — **KK**