



#5, 1988
 Graphite and oil on canvas
 84" x 72"
 Courtesy Betsy Rosenfield Gallery
 Chicago

JOSEPH PICCILLO

by Peter Clothier

"If you think about dancers," says Joseph Piccillo, "you can't help but be amazed at the incredible amount of skill and dedication that's required for their work. But at the same time, what they create comes out of a lot of vulnerability and pain."

It's not surprising, perhaps, that Piccillo fixes on dancers, divers — even horses — as the central images of his work: his pictures share with these subjects that sense of dedicated expertise, of energy directed by an absolute, intense training of the concentration. His chiaroscuro is the heightened play of conflicting passions for freedom and raw power, creative whimsy and rigorous control.

Piccillo's vision has remained remarkably consistent. The origins of his current work are clearly evident in the pictures he was generating as long ago as the early seventies. Then, it took the form of series that went by titles like "Restraint," and "Game Structures." "I was already working with images awkwardly dispersed on the canvas," he says, recalling the graphic images that stood out in those early days against a white ground. "With 'Game Structures,' I wanted to create visual puzzles — pictures that would provoke people to get involved and to question, rather than be definitive in terms of a specific narrative."

With this idea of viewer participation in mind, Piccillo



Opposite:
Study E-11, 1989
 Charcoal on paper
 74" x 48"
 Courtesy Brendan Walter Gallery
 Santa Monica

Right:
 #85-2, 1985
 Mixed media on canvas
 84" x 120"
 Photo credit: Biff Henrich
 Courtesy Brendan Walter Gallery
 Santa Monica



notes, he first explored the possibilities of cut-out figures with some kind of magnetic attachment, which could be shifted around in the field. "They ended up stationary, of course," he adds. "But there was an implied action, an interchangeability of parts." The viewer was offered a series of images — clowns and jesters, beasts of prey, and abstract symbols — many of them clearly highly charged in emotional and symbolic values. Yet beyond their expertly defined rendering, they remained enigmatic. Masked or faceless, without specified significance, their presence was bereft of the usual connectives that create a semantic or a narrative logic.

This is the territory of dream, or nightmare. Teased on with clues (or "informations," to use a word Piccillo later came to favor,) that seemingly reference the known world of people, objects, and events, the viewer is irresistibly led on into the surrealistic mirrored hall of meanings that call out in familiar and resonant voices, but refuse to be pinned down. They speak as much to the subconscious as to the conscious mind.

Piccillo explored this territory further in the series of horse drawings that followed. Throughout the history of man's imaginative life, from the caves of ancient dwellings to contemporaries like Susan Rothenberg and Deborah Butterfield, the oniric figure of this awesome creature has occupied a special place. It continues to haunt Piccillo's work today. So powerful are these images that critics tend to get side-tracked into Piccillo's master-draftsmanship, identifying the creatures' peculiarly compelling presence with the artist's representational skills, as though a kind of intensified realism were his goal.

Yet this view is contradicted by a number of factors — not least by the deep, black, graphite background out of which the figures leap, or against which they prance. Moreover, there is the artist's use of dramatic cropping to draw attention to the picture's edge and the always off-centered relationship between figure and ground; the heavily stylized rendering of veins and musculature, and the often overtly decorative patterning of manes and tails — all of which work together to evoke figures of heroic, classical proportions.

This is a far cry from representational realism. Besides, says the artist, "I don't view them as horses, but as human surrogates. They can be aggressive, vulnerable, serene or restless." As surrogates, they invariably play the part of protagonists, leading the action in what Piccillo identifies in the generic title of one series as "Edge Events" — a play of words

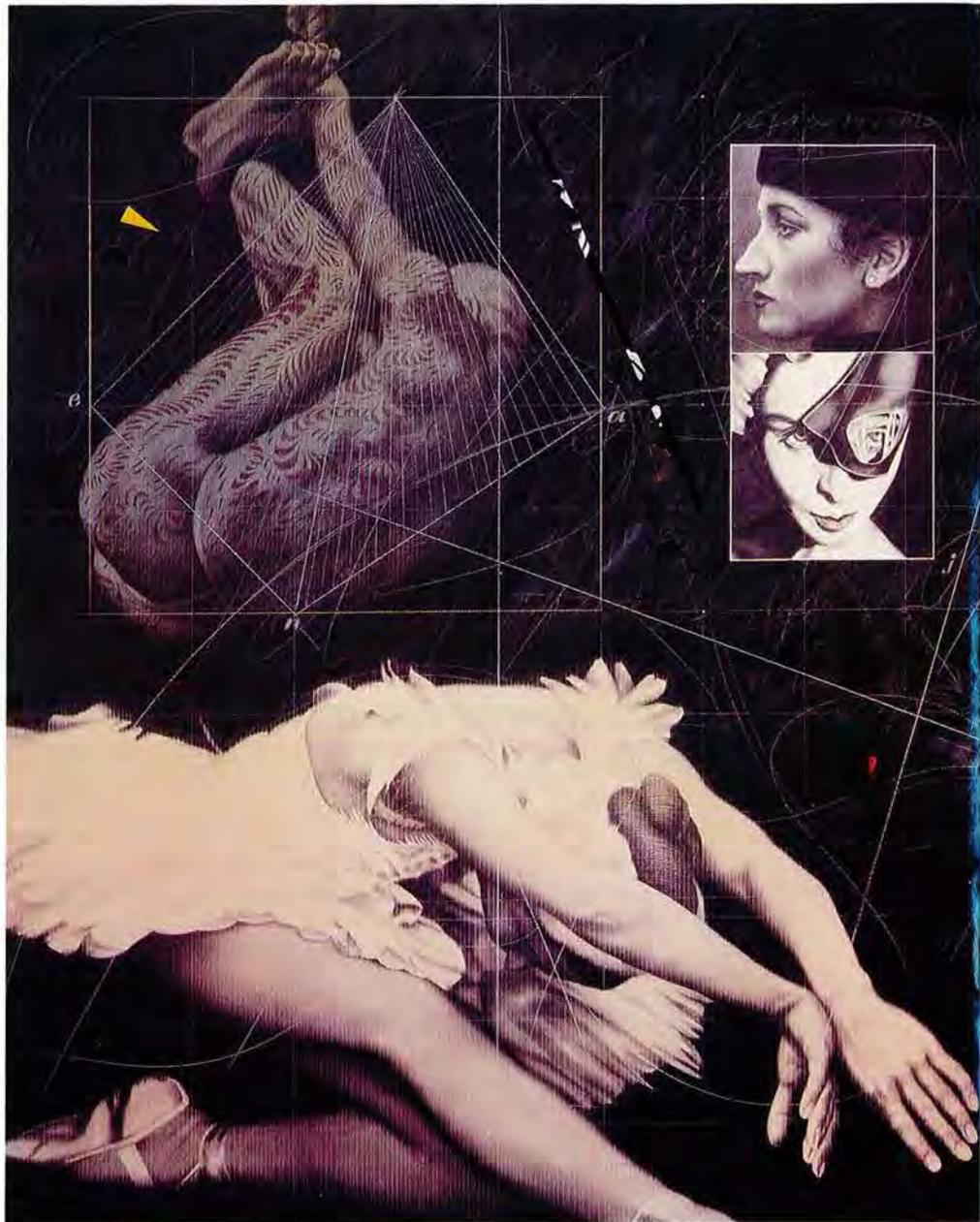


F-9, 1988
 Charcoal on paper
 74 1/2" x 47 1/2"
 Courtesy
 Betsy Rosenfield
 Gallery,
 Chicago



Study F-2, 1988
 Charcoal on paper, 40 1/2" x 59 1/4"
 Courtesy Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago

#10, 1989
Mixed media on canvas
72" x 97"
Courtesy
Brendan Walter Gallery,
Santa Monica



which compounds the artist's visual concerns with psychological and philosophical implications.

Not surprisingly, these powerful, lively images proved immensely successful — so much so, says Piccillo, "that I began to be spooked by them. I wanted to assume another challenge." The first of the subsequent series — which continues to the present — was a 1985 piece identified as #85-2 [Piccillo eschews titles because, he says laconically, "I wouldn't know what to title them. And besides, I hate labeling slides. It's a pain."] He was toying with an idea based on the phrase "I'll do tricks for you" — a phrase which is repeated several times in chalky notations down the side of the picture and across the bottom.

"I was interested in the machinations between people," the artist says, "The notion of people performing for other people." In this work, there are two "performers" — the diver on the left side, and the woman posed in Victorian costume on the right. The diver, of course, brings immense

finesse to his action, yet he remains extraordinarily vulnerable in his near-nakedness, his falling posture, the tilt of his body which suggest a barely controllable imbalance. The woman shares these qualities. Her elaborate dress and coiffure are a performance in themselves, the fulfillment of a social requirement which contrasts poignantly with the vulnerability of her throat and facial expression.

Yet the logic of the association of these two figures is by most standards absurd: a man, caught in mid-dive into nowhere, in contemporary swimsuit, and from the last century, a modishly-dressed woman gazing into vacancy. No temporal or narrative framework explains their conjoined presence here. Instead, a visual logic imposes itself with arbitrary insistence. As in most other of Piccillo's recent works, the monochromatic darkness of the background acts as the foundation only for a whole series of undisguised controlling devices.

The overall chalk grid first makes its presence felt: it is even



Top: F-7, 1987
Charcoal on paper
36 1/2" x 73 1/2"
Photo credit Biff Henrich
Courtesy Brendan Walter Gallery, Santa Monica

Lower: E-13, 1989
Charcoal on paper
47" x 85"
Photo credit: Steve Mangione
Courtesy Brendan Walter Gallery, Santa Monica

punctuated for emphasis with occasional dots of color or circled marks at its intersections. Fading in and out within this overall framework, a strict pattern of narrow vertical lines ("like a television on its side," says the artist,) draws special attention to itself in passages where it appears to become the central theme, creating picture planes within the picture. At the same time, gestural, colored lines emerge here and there to suggest still larger organizational shapes that transcend the confines of the canvas; and a strong, centrally placed vertical is intersected at dead center by diagonals which integrate the whole composition.

The formality of these statements of control is countered by other effects: occasional smudges of color — green, blue, maroon — appear as if by accident throughout the surface, dusting it with evidence of casual, almost tender human contact. The overall, Twombly-esque "scribble" effect which follows the lines of the grid like the hieroglyphs of some undecipherable journal, adds a personal, expressive quality

to the field which it breaks up, and provides a kind of white sound in the background which the viewer hears constantly as he explores the images.

Thus the ground which Piccillo's images occupy is fraught with the same kind of tension between freedom and constraint that characterizes the images themselves. If the curiously postured figures grab the eye initially, it is the surfaces that retain it. Filled with intricate visual interest and variety, they tease the attentive eye across a plane which now seems to emphasize its modernist flatness, and now plays impishly with illusion. What else is one to make, for example, of those schematic three-dimensional models — pyramids or cubes, interiors or architectural renderings — which suddenly appear without other rhyme or reason in these surfaces?

There is invariably something painful about the images themselves. Their postures alone suggest contortion and discomfort. There is also something purposefully artificial about

most of them, not only in their content but in their rendering: They betray their photographic origins. "By and large," says Piccillo, "they come from newspapers and magazines, and have therefore already been seen as something public. I peruse literally thousands of images, and respond to only a few. The selection is really a matter of subconscious intuition, but I look for some edge to them, some terror."

The recurrent bondage images, for example, are taken from vintage erotica magazines which a former student sent him. Yet Piccillo insists that he remains tentative about their more violent implications. "I'm still not clear on whether shock is a good thing or not," he admits. "I want to disturb people, but not that overtly. I've always tried to be somewhat subtle. But then," he adds, "the rougher pictures are my favorites. I'm torn between taking out the jambs on violence or downplaying it."

The paradox of bondage — intimate, torturous physical stricture practiced in the name of sexual license — is, of course, another extension of Piccillo's central aesthetic pre-occupation. The contrast of the constricting artifice of leather and the natural vulnerability of flesh parallels the poise and costume of the dancer, the acrobatic contortions of the diver, the physical beauty and the bared teeth of the pit bull or the eagle's beak.

In amongst these recurring and disturbing images, isolated in the boxes that contain them, the smaller black and white portraits have a haunting and mysterious presence. Clearly not players as the other images are, they seem self-preoccupied, cool and unfazed, detached from the action, voyeur-like in their little window seats. They are at once sanitized in their distance from the action, yet complicit in it — and their complicity is that of the on-looker, the viewer, as it is the artist's. "I am a voyeur," he admits cheerfully, "as I think most people who make pictures probably are."

This constant play between distance and complicity is the moral force that involves one's restless and discomforting participation in these pictures. Their drama, of course, is a purposeful and powerful hook. "A visitor will pass a hundred paintings in a museum," says Piccillo. "I want mine to make them stop and look." Beyond the hook, however, the literary analogy with drama yields useful insights with this work: Some literary critics have suggested that absurdist theater comes closer than realism to tragedy in the modern age. Realism, they say, is always reductive in its attribution of human pain to social and psychological circumstance, and thus veers off into pathos. True tragedy was the expression of a purer form of pain — the pain of an Oedipus, say, inflicted beyond rational explanation by forces greater than human.

In this light, Piccillo's heroic figures take on a tragic cast. Because his horses, for example, remain remote despite their closer-than-comfort presence in the picture plane, they have more the feel of tragedy than pathos. The void which surrounds the actors in a Beckett play ("I'm a Beckett fan, too," confirms the artist,) engulfs these figures. And as in a Beckett play, their deliberate resistance to explicable meaning invites an endless, irresolvable play of multiple meanings instead.

Piccillo's performers take part in a melodrama, a theater of the absurd which edges constantly upon a theater of cruelty. The artist himself sees the work as a sequence, allowing identical images to recur in different situations. "When I started this series," he says, "most of the pictures tended to be the same height, so I visualized them as a very long mural, like a



film. The same characters began to come in and out, almost like a conscience."

Yet while the artist himself returns frequently to the terminology of drama in speaking of his work, he resists too close a parallel. "I don't want them to be literary in any way," he says. "I want them to be pictures." He is concerned, however, that they challenge viewers to think beyond them, to the current state of the world. While at pains to avoid polemical positions, he insists that a politically-controlled world must be political. "I think we live in a madhouse. Recently I've become jaded a bit. I just get frustrated, not angry any more." Yet he warms up as he cites the example of an Oliver North. "What kind of society is it," he asks rhetorically, "that gives credibility to people who should be in jail? And if it's like this now, what will things be like in ten years? In twenty years?"

At the same time, he remains an optimist. Brought up as "a Norman Thomas liberal," he was taught always to question, and it is that attitude that he seeks to perpetuate in his art. If it confronts the viewer with images that ask the difficult questions about power and control, and on the other hand about creativity and freedom, it is an act of thoughtful provocation. "But it's not," he insists, "to pontificate or polemicize. You can deal with it any way you want." And then he adds, with refreshing self-deprecation for an artist of such strong conviction, "They're only pictures, after all. They shouldn't be taken all that seriously." ▲

Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago will hold an exhibition of Piccillo's work in January 1991.

Peter Clothier writes about art from Los Angeles. He is the author of two novels set in the art world, Chiaroscuro (St. Martin's Press) and Dirty-Down (Atheneum).