



"HAMNUR TRILOGY," 1947  
Wolfgang Paalen  
OIL ON CANVAS, 79.9" x 74.8"

blocks, then hung on a brushed metal frame, the dress is monumental and prismatic. The emptiness engulfs the whole, as if to say, "No, your mother is not here; there is nothing here but red fabric, gold buttons and air."

Inanimate objects are here imbued with symbolic presence. Glasses once abandoned on an open book are now memorialized in Lucite, becoming evermore image-like. Removed from the tactile realm of the living they enter a dream space reserved for memories. "Field Equations" suggests that what was once alive in these objects, the last remaining trace of the living, has been frozen in time.

—KIM BEIL

#### SAN FRANCISCO Wolfgang Paalen at Frey Norris

Wolfgang Paalen may have been the last of the true believers. Prior to the time when the Austrian-born painter and theoretician took his own life in Mexico in 1959, he spent three years in San Francisco, as the titular leader of a group of artists called the Dynaton Group. Made up of Surrealist refugees, including Lee Mullican and Gordon Onslow Ford, the group had an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1951, with a catalog written by Paalen himself. This essay may well be the last real manifesto of high Modernism; its tendentious language fully echoes the hubris that we find in the writings of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and André Breton. That exhibition remains the clearest link between the Parisian surrealist movement and a Northern California art history that was deeply influenced by Surrealism for three subsequent decades.

This show included 21 works, beginning with a 1922 sketch of a scene from Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, from when the artist was 17, and ending with some works executed in 1953–54 that found the halfway point between surrealist autonomism and abstract expressionist improvisation. Along the way, we see Paalen careening from influence to influence, moving toward and away from exercises in pure form as well as into renditions of mythic symbols extracted from his own imagination. This is not to say that Paalen's work was unfocused or derivative but rather to point out how, for Paalen, an influence was something to be worked through rather than merely appropriated or avoided. Sometimes the effort was successful, as seen in two delightful untitled watercolors from 1933, and sometimes it wasn't, as could be seen in *Ciel de Pieuvre* from 1938, which lives too much in the shadow of the work of Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy.

Some smaller works called *Fumages* that were executed from 1938 to 1944 were some of the biggest hits in the show. In these pieces, where the artist exhaled through a straw to delicately blow paint into cloud-like configurations that anticipated Jackson Pollock's all-over paintings. The real showstopper was the largest work, 1947's *Hamnur Trilogy*, featuring three rather primitive-looking figures located in a dark foreboding picture space. Here, we see Paalen synthesizing all of his influences into a powerful, fully original work that sustains a gripping psychological interest, perhaps symbolizing the fear and sadness that prompted the artist to end his own life.

—MARK VAN PROYEN

#### SAN FRANCISCO

**Dennis McNulty: "When one of your own color could be so different it puts you on a wonder"**  
at Mark Wolfe Contemporary Art

The South exerts a mythic hold on the American imagination; it is often depicted as our Third World, backward, brutal and bigoted. With its recent ascendancy in national politics, starting when Falwell met Orwell—and its incipient decline with the waning of war fever—it might be useful to consider the fundamentalist red states anew, less as the exotic benighted 'other' than as a local variant of 'regular' capitalist Christian Americanism: to stop projecting our sins south, no matter how deeply gratifying (and occasionally justifiable).

In his recent show entitled "When one of your own color could be so different it puts you on a wonder," Dennis McNulty plays right into those fears of otherness. Based in San Francisco, McNulty is a Southerner by upbringing. His work overtly embraces

Southern clichés—shotguns, pickups, churches, Stars & Bars, baseball caps, mulets and Jesus—combining them into graphically compelling images that both celebrate Dixie and reproach it for its failings.

"Church is Jesus is The South," reads one panel, while another reads, "Concealed hater." Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which furnishes McNulty's titles, follows the spiritual growth of a black woman in the early 20th century. McNulty's laser-cut vinyl silhouettes on paper (inevitably recalling Kara Walker's in style and sensibility) concern themselves with the spiritual stasis of church-ridden southern whites. *Electric Jesus* rises from the Confederacy like a liquid metal Terminator flanked by telephone poles awaiting their good and bad thieves; He all suggests the infamous hooded Abu Ghraib detainee. The silhouetting lends itself to open interpretation, as Rorschach inkblots do, and one could almost imagine jumping gyrating dreadlocked black figures used to sell the gentry, say, iPods. But this nonrac 'blackface' allows us to contemplate the figures as symbols rather than as people, for better or worse; their repetition explodes their icon status and renders them absurd.

*The House of God*, McNulty's Kienholz-ian mini-chapel of scavenged wood, houses a copy of the 1920 book *555 Difficult Bible Questions Answered* open on a lectern beneath a hanging light bulb. For the record: Judas' 30 pieces of silver (shekels) were worth \$18.

—DEWITT CHE



"ELECTRIC JESUS" 2007, Dennis McNulty  
ACRYLIC AND VINYL ON PAPER, 27" x 27"

#### SAN FRANCISCO Livia Stein: "India On My Mind" at Togonon Gallery

Travel has been a part of western artistic education since Renaissance artists journeyed to Rome to revere the freshly unearthed marble treasures of antiquity.