

COLLISION



THE
CONTEMPORARY
ART SCENE
IN HOUSTON,
1972-1985

PETE GERSHON

sixties, were images of vulnerability, with naked falling male figures. So I thought I would de-macho the cowboy, make him naked with the Stetson and nothing else." The paintings placed these nude urban cowboys in the foreground of specific views of the city's congested roadways, bringing these allegorical figures into the here and now. Boshier's work was immediately well-received in Houston, and the CAM's new assistant curator Cheryl Brutvan offered him a solo show the following winter.

When the school year began anew in September, the Annex was ready. Lawndale hosted a large exhibition of works by Louisiana artists, organized by the Contemporary Arts Center of New Orleans and juried by the CAM's new director, Linda Cathcart. In October Professor David Hickman organized a show titled *Eyes of Texas* that surveyed narrative paintings, sculptures, and drawings by living Texas folk artists. And in November, a small group show called *Four Painters* showcased the work of a quartet of key University of Houston students hand-picked by Surls: Kelly Alison, Jeff DeLude, Judy Long, and Jim Poag. All four were close friends and heavily influenced by German expressionism. All studied its history under Professor Peter Guenther. "Loud colors, more is more, more paint, more everything," says Alison. "It was the semester when you could see the most coherent and brave work from us. I think we were all rebels during that period of our lives and we were stumbling upon the same neo-expressionist trends that were happening everywhere."

Alison was the transplant from Waco who'd been attracted to the University of Houston after overhearing Surls and Alexander rave about the new warehouse space while in line at the Gourmet Burger. She'd grown up on the West Texas panhandle steeped in art: her father sculpted, her mother aspired to be a fashion designer, and they took young Kelly on trips to galleries in Santa Fe when she was a girl. They were supportive, to a point. "Art was a nice thing for women to do," she says, "but it wasn't considered to be a career." They liked the realistic portraits and landscapes she made at West Texas State, but after she arrived at the University of Houston, things

started to change. A seven-foot painting from 1980 titled *Girl Child* depicts a disturbing bedroom scene representing a "conflict in the mind of a young girl reaching adolescence." The central figure—actually a self portrait—lies in bed clutching an apple, representing a loss of innocence. She is surrounded by shadowy, abstracted figures that suggest other, darker sides of Alison's personality. When her parents visited and saw her new artwork, they asked, "Are you okay, honey?"

From a technical standpoint, Alison was influenced most strongly by John Alexander's painterliness. She recalls particularly a show of Alexander's at the Max Hutchinson Gallery in Montrose where she was struck by the lushness of the paint and the scale of the canvases. "Shortly after that exhibition," she remembers, "I coaxed him into teaching me how to 'squiggle' a long-haired brush back and forth in such a way as to mimic the kind of brush strokes you see in his work." She was just as influenced by Surls's drawings. "The way James drew," she says, "never lifting his pencil from the page, just letting the mind's eye go to work and the vision take form, well, that is really what art is all about. You could say Alexander taught me how to paint, and Surls taught me how to think."

Alison remembers painter Judy Long as "the cat's meow," a gregarious, wisecracking, buxom blonde whom everyone adored. Besides being an art student, Long worked as a nanny and as a waitress in a strip joint, and many of her paintings depicted the club, its dancers, and its clientele. In an artist's statement published at the time of the show, Long wrote that art has "gotta mean something, say something about all these incredible human predicaments in which we find ourselves. I'd only be honest in saying that my paintings are merely visible emotional by-products of my own bigoted reactions to what's going on around me, but I'd sure like to think that the end results go a bit further than that, and maybe knock a few blinders askew."⁶

Poag and DeLude arrived in Houston together, having met at Middle Tennessee State University as undergraduate acolytes of an abstract landscape

Kelly Alison, *Whose Cruise?*, 1982, oil on canvas, 8 x 30 feet.
Photo courtesy of Kelly Alison.

Chuck Dugan, *By Fours*, 1982, oil on canvas, 78 x 120 inches.
Photo courtesy of Tiffany Dugan.



Four Painters

November 1–28, 1980

Lawndale Annex, University of Houston

Organized by James Surls

Exhibition of painting, sculpture, and works on paper by University of Houston students Kelly Alison, Jeff Delude, Judy Long, and Jim Poag.

(a) Installation view with sculpture by Jim Poag in foreground, photo by Fred Bunch, *Houston Post*. RG00006N1980-2791-NO25. HMRC, Houston Public Library.

(b) Invitation card with photo by Glen Gips. Courtesy of Lawndale Art Center Archives.



painter and professor named David Le Doux. After receiving his bachelor's degree in 1977, Poag hung around Murfreesboro painting canvasses and houses. When Delude graduated a year later, the pair embarked on a cross-country road trip to California, researching master's programs and cities with art scenes along the way. Visiting Houston, they happened into the same gallery showing of John Alexander's work that so inspired Alison. Poag remembers they felt a "definite kinship" with the abstracted, painterly landscapes, and after striking up a conversation with the gallery manager, they left with Alexander's phone number. They were invited to bring their slides and portfolios to his studio the next day, and their work impressed Alexander enough to call George Bunker. Later that evening, the four men shared a pitcher of margaritas, shook hands, and