



MARIO NAVES

ECCENTRIC INTRICACY

For a couple of weeks now, I've been struggling in the attempt to write about the mixed-media paintings of Josh Dorman, the subject of an exhibition curated by the novelist Paul Auster for the CUE Art Foundation in Chelsea. The pictures – crazy-quilt amalgamations of topographical maps, invented landscapes, apocalyptic scenarios and diaristic doodles – don't lend themselves to a writerly peg. Mr. Auster concurs: Mr. Dorman's pieces "are difficult to describe, almost impossible to pin down in words," he writes in the catalog.

Try following the stream of images in any one picture – you'll be led astray. Watch as the collaged map of the Mississippi River evolves in to a painted rush of water that, in turn, settles into a descending array of looping lines. At that point, you notice the huge snail and a subterranean cavern filled with – of the things I can name – a ladder, a billiard table and what my notes describe as a "doily alien." Mr. Dorman's "flattened lands" are constantly turning back in on themselves, forever unwilling to give in to the logic of a single vantage point. They're unwilling, as well, to clarify their myriad secrets.

Yet it's not so much the wordlessness of Mr. Dorman's art or its eccentric intricacy that's made it difficult to write about; it's the aesthetic purview. The realization comes courtesy of Manny Farber, whose retrospective of paintings at P.S.1 has obliged me to reread his essay on "termite

art." That's Mr. Dorman's specialty: Art that is "ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved (and) go-for-broke." In his moody pastiches of Cubist structure, Surrealist whimsy and folk-art haplessness, Mr. Dorman has created a cosmos so small and dear it's a wonder he can stand to share it with anyone else.

Only once does Mr. Dorman open the door to the rest of us: in *Fledging Lament* (2004), wherein a tracery of white lines, breaking free of a smoky ground of antique ledger pages, undulates like some kind of free-floating collective memory. It's a haunting and elegiac piece, as rich and as spare as a Chinese landscape painting or a still life by Morandi. It's worthy of Braque's dictum, as quoted by Mr. Auster in the catalog: "There is only one thing in art of any value – that which cannot be explained."

Josh Dorman is at the CUE Art Foundation, 511 West 25th Street, until Nov. 27.