

# Mike Carroll FOR EACH WORK, AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

By Michelle Weinberg

**W**ITH HIS FEET squarely planted in the parallel universes of the gallery and the artists' studio, artist and director of the Schoolhouse Gallery, Michael Carroll, also resides in the separate but equally eccentric art worlds of Provincetown and South Florida. This duality, perhaps better described as a collaboration (like the synergy of harmonizing the left brain with the right brain!), reveals itself in his life and work.

Carroll and I spoke about this particular "collaboration" one morning when I stopped to visit him in his Fort Lauderdale digs. The discussion continually floated back to Provincetown, and I had the sensation that we were existing in both places at once. He described the year-round syndrome that afflicts Provincetowners and how that affects art made there—"small works, with an emphasis on physicality." New England values are deeply ingrained in Provincetown painting, he said. Honesty and sincerity mean that the imagery must be uncovered from the material itself. Burnishing, scraping, repainting, and "correcting" is highly valued, and so the labor teeters on the border of being obsessive. Provincetown's close-knit community naturally led to an intimate scale, analogous to "book-sized works" or "a quiet conversation with one or two sympathetic people." Neither of us failed to notice the fact of so much unconditional support in Provincetown. Carroll attributes this bonding to the seasonal seesaw of Provincetown, instilling an annual rhythm, and offering both a sense of "renewal" and a feeling of "schizophrenia." Energy levels are obliged to adjust to the ebb and flow of tides, populations, finances.

Contrast all that refinement of craft in humble isolation with the flip side of Carroll's migratory existence. The South Florida art scene is Provincetown's polar opposite, a swollen, luxury- and commerce-driven milieu that caters to hordes of European and Latin American tourists, glitterati, and power brokers. Annually, the Miami art world plays host to the entire world's artists, collectors, curators, and hangers-on in its mega-fair Art Basel Miami Beach. Artists here shoot out of high school aimed at nothing less than immediate stardom.

Carroll has bridged the gap between his two worlds successfully. After spending time in Boston, he landed in Provincetown, where the fashion for reinvention, starting over, was liberating. In 1998, he began to work with David Davis, founder of the Schoolhouse Center on Commercial Street in a repurposed school building. The gallery's mission was always to keep it real—meaning close to the source, showcasing the production of local artists.



PHYSIOGNOMY, 2008, OIL AND GRAPHITE ON PANEL, 11 BY 8 INCHES

It opened with a workshop upstairs. In 2006, he took ownership of the gallery, revved up the artist roster, and started to make the conversion from a business that floated on the generosity of a patron to a self-sustaining commercial enterprise. Carroll responded to that challenge by collaborating with designers and architects and initiating a design shop within the gallery.

Carroll has focused his analytical and communication skills on translating the vision of the artists he represents to the public by revealing "an organizing principle that allows each work to express itself." He also has become highly sensitized to the placement of works in the gallery space, borrowing from his experience as a painter choreographing the interaction of forms on the picture plane. He defines his imperative as a dealer as "reminding people to assign value to the artist's work in the studio." The past several years have seen his ambitions for the gallery steadily increasing.

Participating in art fairs, he connects work made in Provincetown's cozy enclave with the fast-paced global art market, and creates exposure for the artists. Collaborations on design-related projects have also encouraged the artists to work in new mediums beyond their conventional studio practice.

At this point in our conversation, we stepped into his diminutive studio, which is more compatible in scale with Provincetown than its actual location, tucked in amidst the high-rise condos and office towers of downtown Fort Lauderdale, mere blocks away. His paintings are filled with gentle curves, a muted palette, and tender intersections among the forms. He pointed to the empty centers in many of his works, a Zen signifier of potential. This sensitivity to the hidden forces at play in each work and his vulnerability to the subtexts and desires exerted on him from each canvas cast the artist in the role of a tender nurturer of some form of natural phenomena. His process is a direct descendant and a personal innovation on Hofmann's famous "push-pull" directive. "Every painting I ever made in Provincetown is blue," he said. "In Florida, there

are no limits on palette. I let the color do the work." His love of formal structures is apparent. In many works "the comforting repetition of pattern provides the way into the painting" and then



TIMEOVER, 2008, OIL ON PANEL, 10 BY 10 INCHES

