

March 17, 2004

D.C. Diary by Tyler Green

Ian Whitmore, Feb. 7-Mar. 20, 2004, at Fusebox, 1412 14th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20005

Joy Garnett, Jan. 15-Feb. 21, 2004, at Debs & Co., 525 W. 26th Street, New York, New York 10001 [excerpt]



Joy Garnett: Leap 2003. Debs & Co., New York



Joy Garnett: Molotov, 2003



Joy Garnett: Stones



Joy Garnett: Riot, 2003

At **Debs & Co.** in Chelsea, **Joy Garnett** showed a body of new figurative paintings that depicted individual urban protestors and rebel activists, apparently from the 1960s and after.

Garnett uses old-fangled painterly techniques to give her work verve. Figures are coiled, about to burst out of the structure forced upon them. In *Leap*, a man jumping over a fire is barely contained by the top of the canvas. In *Molotov*, an activist holding a lit Molotov cocktail (a few shmears of paint reveal the cocktail to be in a Pepsi bottle), fills the right half of the canvas. His hips torque, his arm coils, his face scrunches in anger and exertion. He and that bottle are about to exit the painting, stage left.

My favorite painting in the show, *Stones*, makes use of one of the most-tested painting tricks in the book: the dominant diagonal. (Garnett works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I'd bet she's spent some time there with Degas and Cézanne.) A diagonal line splits the canvas, from a stone in the upper left, down the stone-thrower's arm, all the way down to the lower right-hand side of the canvas. On the lower half of the canvas, the stone-thrower's body vibrates with energy. In the upper half, hair flies off the man's head.

There's nothing particularly new in Garnett's paintings. They are based on news photographs, a sly nod to the current dominance of photography as a contemporary, responsive medium. (Think Jeff Wall, Chan Chao or Catherine Opie, for example. Of course from Goya to Picasso, there's a long tradition of painters responding to contemporary life too, we just haven't seen it as much lately.) Garnett's brushwork is strong, gestural, even exciting in paintings like *Riot* or *Stones*. I like Garnett's compositions, but I love her brushwork.