

# DO TITLES REALLY MATTER?

BY PAUL GARDNER

**W**hat's in a title? Sometimes great drama. Veronese, as the art historian Jack Flam reminds us, was dragged before the Inquisition in Venice in 1573 because religious authorities were offended by secondary figures in his rendering of the Last Supper. Veronese was grilled about certain improprieties—"buffoons, drunkards, Germans, dwarfs and similar vulgarities," the record attests. He tried to claim poetic license—the artist against rigid dogma—but his inquisitors out-argued him. To save himself from this dangerous predicament, he simply titled the piece *The Feast in the House of Levi*. Veronese and his work, with the new title, survived.

In a lighter vein, Ivan Karp, who runs New York's O.K. Harris Gallery, recalls that titling can sometimes be as casual as the morning call for coffee. He remembers working for Leo Castelli when Andy Warhol showed up with a batch of paintings—none titled. Andy didn't have any ideas. "We need titles for filing cards. I recommend them," advised Karp. Andy shrugged. Viewing his paintings of Marilyn Monroe, Karp said, "All right, we'll call it the

'Marilyn' series.'" Contemplating Andy's scenes of car crashes, Karp backed a pace or two, and said, "That's the 'Disaster' series.'" Concludes Karp, "When an image is confounding, vivid, enigmatic—a title gives us an entrance to the work."

What's in a title? Everything from puns to poetry, from music lyrics to lines from movies. A survey of artists whose work ranges from Abstract Expressionism to Pop to site-specific sculpture reveals that they believe some kind of title, whether personal or playful, is more helpful in identifying a piece, and keeping it in the viewer's mind, than the vague *Untitled*.

Curiously, in recent seasons a few galleries have stopped putting title labels alongside work. If it's a group show, you're on your own as to who's who. It's a trend that artists as well as viewers deplore—and, as for the titles, most artists feel that they're important enough to be up on the wall and that one shouldn't have to hunt them down at the front desk. After all, some titles are visual creations waiting to be seen, just like the art.



I think of a title while I'm painting and then write it down on a piece of paper that goes on the wall under the painting. I can look at the title in association with what I'm putting on canvas. A new work, *Metabolism*, shows brightly colored ovals coming out of a purple-violet space. The title actually informs the painting. It's a philosophical idea about the nature of making a work. Two years ago my painting was less personal, so titles were more descriptive.

CHRIS FELVER



Judy Pfaff

Still, there's a double meaning—I hope. Metaphors can be taken further.

Essentially, though, I want to tell the truth with a title—the truth for me. I'm not looking for Greek phrases or the ultra-lyrical or anything highfalutin. I'm frightened of pretension.

Titling always comes at the end, and it involves worry. Galleries like titles. After all, they don't want collectors asking, "How much does the big red one cost?"

## Jonathan Lasker

When a painting is finished, I first consider its nature and spirit, then try to find a parallel between them—and decide on a title. There's an emotive quality in my work as well as a rationally organized quality.

Take the painting *Euphoric Routines*: it has a background of some freehand scribbling, an abstract shape in the foreground, with a lot of strong brushstrokes. I wanted a title that would convey an interplay between the instinctual and the designed. *Euphoric Routines* has this interplay and an appealing contradiction—as if any routine could be euphoric.

Titling gives me a condensed shot at being a poet.

## Judy Pfaff

Some artists seem to have a genius when it comes to titles. Not me. Titling a work can be one of the most difficult things to do. I get conflicted. I change titles *after* I've settled on them. Mine are always pedestrian, your basic rock-bottom stuff, like *Apples and Oranges*. They're simple, easy, vernacular, and may sound like children's titles. Remember *Rock, Paper, Scissors?*

ALLEN FOKACH/THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN



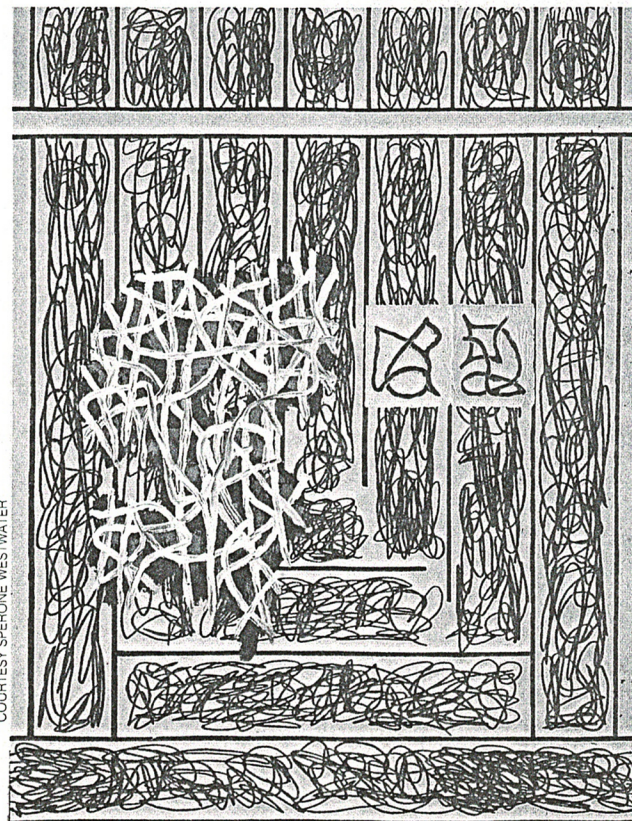
Ursula von Rydingsvard BELOW Jonathan Lasker, *Euphoric Routines*, 1989.

## Ursula von Rydingsvard

A title may come months after a work is finished, or it may not come at all. It's not something I force or squeeze out. However, the label next to a piece is the first thing the public zeros in on. They think it will help them understand the piece. It's not the best approach. Experiencing the work is.

It wouldn't be honest for me to say I know the source of my best titles. After more than a year, I recently finished the biggest, most site-specific piece in my life. In the Sonoma Valley, north of San Francisco, I carved into a mountainside a shelf that's 77 feet wide. I had listed many titles that were possible, but none seemed right.

It wasn't until I was on the plane returning to New York that I came up with the answer: *Iggy's Pride*. And I do know the source. It's my father. His name was Ignac. In the last years of his life, the staff at his nursing home called him Iggy. He was a man who understood concrete things, like floorboards, hinges on doors, beams. I feel the Sonoma Valley piece is very concrete but also has a spirituality. So the title salutes my father.



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