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Really Now?



MIDWEST PAINTERS DEMONSTRATE REALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

By Jud Yalkut

Taking its cue from Sigmund Freud's treatise on psychology and civilization, the current exhibition by the Midwest Paint Group tackles the place of realism and figurative art in contemporary times. Curated by Glen Cebulash, Chair of Art and Art History at Wright State University, *Realism and Its Discontents* confronts artists' commitment to what they term "Post Abstract Figuration" and its new configuration in the face of most contemporary gallery art tendencies. The exhibition runs at the Robert and Elaine Stein Galleries at Wright State University through May 6.

Guest artist Gabriel Laderman (December 26, 1929 – March 11, 2011), who agreed to participate as guest artist in this show before his death, was a New York-based painter who had studied with such primal abstractionist figures as Ad Reinhardt and Mark Rothko. Eschewing his earlier tendencies in that direction, by the 1980s his work was figurative and even narrative, sometimes even based on the Inspector Maigret detective novels by Belgian author Georges Simenon.

Laderman was a friend and mentor of the Midwest Paint Group starting in 2004, and he wrote an essay for their 2005 exhibition in which he stated: "It requires your attention because it is unlike most figurative work seen in galleries today. You need to concentrate on the experience of each painting and get into its world of forming and emotion."

Laderman's three works in *Realism* demonstrate his observational mastery in oils with his immaculate studio study "Still Life as Order and Chaos," his stoic and dramatically silent "Two Dancers Resting," and the translucent "The Card Player" with her distant stare (all from 1983-84). He believed that "working without history is a kind of visual starvation" and that the Midwest Paint Group "included a sense of the abstract construction of the forms and colors and their rhythm in light and space."

Curator Glen Cebulash, whose own work has beautifully deconstructed the figurative into interacting planes and color forms in both painting and collage, opines that realism "is a fascinating and slippery concept and one that confounds as much as it clarifies."

The overlapping of realism and abstraction is nowhere as pungent as in the work of Galesburg, Illinois artist Lynette Lombard, whose oil "Ox-Bow Tree and Lagoon" (2010) poses a thick white gestural trunk against planes of blue and orange, and whose work "Waverock" (2009) takes the viewer

from expressionist fervor towards the cogent essays as to how realism can effect abstract economy in such works as “Cliff and Sea, Spain” and “Chicago Railbridge” (both 2010). Deborah Chlebek from Yellow Springs, an Adjunct Instructor and graduate of Wright State University, has simplified her message with bold dark strokes in such pieces as “Ellis 96” and increased atmospheric in “Ellis 97” (both 2011).

Color and pattern dominate in the luscious still lifes of Chicago’s Megan Williamson, with boldly contrasting wrap-around foldings in “Paper Still Life” (2011) and overall curlicues with an evanescent glass object in “Still Life with Glass Bottle” (2010). Bob Brock from Kansas City, MO, approaches an abstract Corot-like feeling in his “Linda’s Lake” (2011) and then lets soaring linear structures capture “Trees at Unity Village” (2011), beautifully augmented by a suite of drawings in the gallery corridor.

It may be somewhat significant that most of these Midwest artists are teachers in various institutions, an indication that such support is vital to artists who don’t live in large urban centers. University art departments have progressed through changes of genre, from abstract expressionism to conceptual art, but the “realism” factor is one that constantly re-emerges. Approaching photo-realism are works from such artists as St. Louis’ Michael Neary, who injects bizarre elements like a skeleton in a basket and a Shiva behind lemons in his “Vanitas: Talk to the Hand” (2010), or the permutations through smaller studies to the large dominant canvas “Backyard Summer” (2010) by Jeremy Long from Ithaca, New York with its edges of magic realism reminiscent of Peter Blume.

Tina Engels of Chicago paints her soft-edged “Still Life with Shell” (2011) in a careful arrangement with dried flowers; Amy MacLennan from St. Louis paints broad gestures in “Lilac Study Gold” (2010) and makes her “Ethanol Plant, Peoria” dissolve into the landscape. Philip Hale from Wilmington, Ohio portrays a row of red vehicles on a hilly small-town corner in “Taxi Paradise 5” (2011). Timothy King from Chicago, working in pastels, converges trees around “Winding Road, Elgin, Illinois” and descending steps in the wind-blown “Loyola Lakeshore, Chicago” (both 2011). Ron Weaver, from both Arizona and Maine, captures the white cloud bank over suburban spaces seen through a large window in the oil and acrylic “The Light” (1990).

Apart from any dialectical exchanges about the validity of figurative reality in our contemporary times, there is a true joy in simply appreciating the direct approach of articulating paint on canvas to reveal form, color and inner space. As David Carbone of the University of Albany, New York wrote, relating to his friend Gabriel Laderman and his vision of the Midwest Paint Group: “He saw your efforts both as an act of courage against the marketplace and valor in the cause of authentic perceptual expressiveness.”

(The Robert and Elaine Stein Galleries are located in A132 Creative Arts Center of Wright State University on Colonel Glenn Highway in Dayton. Gallery hours are 10a.m. – 4p.m. Wednesday and Friday, 10a.m. – 7p.m. Thursday, and Noon – 4p.m. Saturday and Sunday. (937) 775-2973.)

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[Image: Jeremy Long’s “Summer” (2011), oil]

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