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Perspectives

Different Depictions of 'Contemporary Still Life'

By Robert Long

"Contemporary Still Life," small works by 24 artists, is the first show of the season at the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art.

Rae Ferren's 36-by-48-inch oil on canvas "Sunlit Garden" is one of the larger pictures on view. It is a warm, impressionistic painting loaded with color. There is a soft quality to the light, as if it were filtered, even though the artist's palette includes vivid greens, yellows, orange, blues and the bright rose-pink color that almost always has a place in Mrs. Ferren's landscapes. The brushwork is thick-

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ish when a cat or a pair of bird baths are depicted, and thinner when landscape elements are indicated. Mood takes precedence over strict representation, although as in most good gestural painting, the heavy brushstrokes that shape the form of a sleeping cat say more about cat-ness than might a more conventional rendition.

Mercedes Matter's charcoal on canvas "Still Life" (40 by 42 inches) is a rigorous, angular depiction of fruit, bowls, and a bottle reminiscent of Cubism, Cezanne, and Giacometti. Individual elements of the composition seem to vibrate, as if they have not quite settled into the picture as a whole, much as the seated figure in a Giacometti portrait never quite seems to comfortably occupy the space in which it is placed. The emphasis is on flux rather than stasis, and drawings like Mrs. Matter's reconfirm the impossible-to-cross distance between the object perceived by the eye and its translation to paper or canvas; such drawings or paintings often are more about that distance than about the object itself, which may as well be

a hubcap as a pear or apple. Objects are the space they occupy and that space's relationship to the rest of the picture is what animates the whole.

Richard Baker's small (10 inches square) "Insects with Fruit" is heavily reminiscent of Albert York's small landscapes. Four pears and four dead insects are casually arranged on a table in the foreground; just over the edge of the table is a muted landscape of trees and houses, painted in grays and greens. The flattening of the image makes the pears seem equal in size to the houses, and their stems echo the shape of a thin gray chimney on the horizon.

The sky, which is the color of dirty chalk, holds a medium-gray cloud, a soft, biomorphic shape that complements the rest of the forms in the picture. Brushwork, as in York pictures, is careful but not invisible. Compositionally the picture is very interesting, and the scale of insects to fruit to houses to cloud is clever and arresting. It is a good picture but it is so (perhaps unconsciously) derivative of the work of a painter who is himself apt to remind the viewer of other, earlier painters that it is difficult to look at without thinking of other people's pictures.

Jim Muehleemann's "Dominion" is another referential picture but the reference is veiled; it summons up associations in a pleasantly mysterious way, without making too-direct connections. This is an oil-on linen work showing a weird, bottle-like object riddled with holes like a slice of Swiss cheese. It stands in a smooth landscape of gently rolling blue-green hills. The bottle occupies much of the surface of the picture, and thus takes "dominion" over the landscape, much as the glass jar in Wallace Stevens's poem "Anecdote of the Jar" "takes dominion" over the Tennessee landscape in which it stands. One is reminded of Philip Guston by the way the object in "Dominion" is painted, and there's a surrealist air to the picture.

Carolee Thea's "Narcissus" is a bright blue plastic fish hanging on a thin wire in front of an old, tarnished mirror. Diane Mayo's "Morandi Still Life" (yet another referential title/ also see Olana C. Clark's "Tiepolo's Pears," which quotes an image directly) is a calm ceramic and wood tableau of a fluted pitcher, a gracefully scalloped fruit dish, a tall, thin pitcher and two bottles, all painted black and resting on a small green wooden platform which is attached to the gallery wall.

Helen Meyrowitz's "Baster" is a representational graphite drawing of a bulb baster standing in a small glass pitcher which rests on a mirror which is placed on a lightly rumpled checked tablecloth. The juxtaposition of shapes and textures here and the characteristic graininess of the drawing give the work the pleasing look of something perfectly hand-made.

An array of old bottles on a mantle in front of a stone wall in an otherwise dark room is the subject of Robert Giard's classical-looking photograph "Photographic Still Life." A tiny camera on a tripod is placed near the bottles. What is most mysterious about the picture is a sliding glass door at the left of the picture which looks out on a blurred, bright afternoon; it acts like the entrance to a modern cave. The lighter parts of the image are warm-looking, nearly sepia-toned, and the interior of the room is in deep shadow; the edge of the mantle and the frame of the glass door are angular, hard-edge shapes which dramatically contrast with the smooth glass contours of the old bottles, and the slow, soft shapes of the stones



Olana C. Clark's "Tiepolo's Pears" hangs in the East Hampton Center for Contemporary Art's opening show of the season, "Contemporary Still-Life," through May 28.—Noel Rowe Photo

behind them. It is a complex, satisfying photograph.

Hendrika Ter Elst's "Pomegranates, Knife, and Bee" is a concise rendition of the title subjects painted onto the center strip of a battered old piece of turquoise wooden board spattered with dirty white drips of old house paint. The work has the look of a sign that might have hung above a shop selling pomegranates a century ago.

Li-Lan's "Nippon 130" is an installment in the artist's ongoing series of highly realistic renditions of postage stamps. Thomas McNulty's "Table and Chair" is a finely worked view of a ladderback chair and a small table worked into arched niches in a slab of bronze. The eight-by-10 inch sculptural relief shows the mark of the artist's hand and has a satisfying rightness to it, especially in the curve of the table edge and the angle of the chair seat as they extend sculpturally from the flat, wall-like surface of the bronze.

Also showing works are Warren Brandt (a

small, warm oil called "Red Table, Red Chair"), John Eskola, Victoria Faust, Marilyn Gold, Elizabeth Gourlay, Eric Holzman, Michael Landi II, Francisco Sainz, Jenny Snider, Robert Valdes, Francisco Vidal, and Ellen Weider. The exhibit will remain on view until May 28; the East Hampton Center is closed on Tuesday and Wednesday.