

Arts & Literature

Painted Over

Reflections on a desperate art.

By Stephen Vincent Kobasa

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Painting as Presence

Through June 27 at Creative Arts Workshop, 80 Audubon St., New Haven. (203) 562-4927, creativeartworkshop.org

Pretty Things

Through Aug. 9 at Artspace, 50 Orange St., New Haven. (203) 772-2709, artspacenh.org.

Even if painting is dead, there are still plenty of attractive corpses and sufficient necrophiles to make up an audience. But where are we to go in search of the living? Two concurrent exhibits in New Haven offer varying instructions.

Juried by William Bailey, *Painting as Presence*, on view until June 27 at Creative Arts Workshop is crowded, with canvases hanging even from low railings and on a closet door.

This is a catholicity that promises something for everyone, and reduces any commentary to a catalogue of possibilities. So here are the barns and turnpike overpasses and all that recognizable, unfeeling geometry; small-scale intensities of realism in mock chiaroscuro, and the tired use of palette knives as an evasion of paint.

The only subplot in one self-portrait is the portrait itself, reduced and mirrored, while the artist registers as absent; it is as if it were one of those milk carton illustrations of a missing child who no one will ever recognize. And there is the cloth of a shirt rendered more ordinary than the subject wearing it, when the paradox of a self-consciously magnified illusion might have made the unremarkable transcendent.

But the odds that there is painting worth looking at among what is included here do play themselves out. Joseph Vivilecchia's "Still Life with Pez in Military Formation" reads like a pageant arranged by an infant Leni Riefenstahl, using the paint-thickened comedy of Wayne Thiebaud. Iris Osterman's "Two Trees" whiten to a pelvic bone abstraction.

Carrie May Smith's "Three Plates" produces an earthquake pun—with forks like the arms of a tremor graph—balanced above a geological collision of abutted tables with its fault line furrows of cloth about to send the dinnerware crashing to the floor. Such potent fragility vibrates only upon close attention; a passing glance registers none of it.

Anders Shafer's "D.C." combines Ben Shahn's sense of space with the edgy dismay of the German Expressionist painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Whose past is this? Did we once know the story? To stand in front of the canvas is to be alive with questions; to want to find your way into this world, for all its threats, and not simply breathe heavily over virtuoso and pointless surfaces hanging on the walls nearby.

Pretty Things, curated by Joy Pepe, at Artspace until Aug. 9 is combative in its selections—and more clear of heart. Its sense of inheritance is direct, without being literal.

The splendid surprise of a traditional formula put in service of the moment defines Mia Brownell's "Still Life with Cock (Currin)"—the crown of thorns, barbed wire, DNA helix, splayed, fucked, hermaphrodite gynecology—all that precision turned into vicious truth.

A gathering of Grant Lincoln Johnston's painted baked goods evoke Miss Havisham's wedding cake in decay, especially when topped by a bare breasted porcelain bride—this is the porous border between sweetness and disgust. Beverly Rippel's "Snow White Eve" at the Creative Arts Workshop show would fit here with its gilded apple doubled in the chrome cake cover.

Klimt with rhinestones combines with a rude Chinese restaurant calendar in Phyllis Bramson's "Naughty Little Things." There are more thin lines here, with innocence at its most fragile—and laughable. Cristi Rinkin's "Sommambulist" is scattered with windows of water into Dante's dark wood. "Oracle" by Ben Weiner has a crystal without a future, and feathers from some defrocked augur's bird cages.

There are sculptures here that draw from painting without becoming it. Cheryl Yun's paper lingerie inscribed with slaughter gives various shapes to Walt Whitman's admission that "Agonies are one of my changes of garments." Oliver Herring's "Swan" is a taxidermist's mockery of extinction—the last of its species, rendered null like the god whose masquerade it once was. "The Golden Pawn Shop" constructed by Jane Rainwater gilds all our culture's debris into uniformity—the condition that actually made Midas miserable.

Dissatisfaction is the essence of art such as this—art that matters. It multiplies the world at the same time as it refuses it. With that motive, even the failures have value.

As what passes for a private elegy since his death early last month, I have been thinking about Robert Rauschenberg and his "Bed" of 1955.

If it was not the last painting, it was, at least, the last of paint, with some artists behaving toward it as a child who screams, ears covered, when there is some finality it rages not to hear.

But there is still work being done that begins as any act of conscience does: futile, but necessary. And what is painting worth in the end if it is not defiant in spite of that?

editor@newhavenadvocate.com

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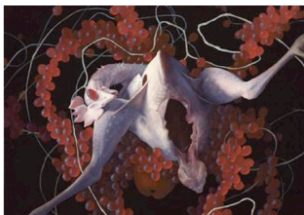


Image Courtesy of Artspace

Mia Brownell's oil painting "Still Life with Cock (Currin)"