

Arts Past Isn't Dead

It isn't even past

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Photo by Jack Gould In Robertson Davies' *What's Bred in the Bone*, Mr. Francis Cornish paints pictures in the manner of the Gothic and Renaissance masters. Not only does he paint in the manner of the masters, but he also hastens a fake craquelure; in further mimicking time, he spreads into the tiny fault lines ancient dust painstakingly collected from the original canvases. Ethically speaking, he might have crossed the line to skullduggery.

Again and again throughout the novel, Cornish and his mentor, Saraceni, remind themselves and each other that it is best to paint in the vernacular of one's own day—but of course, neither of them can. It's the language of yesterday that holds mystery and power for them. And they consider themselves—and are—anachronisms, if not outright frauds.

The novel takes place during World War II, when art people and *The New York Times* were not yet proclaiming the death of God and painting; when there still seemed a chance to create something new; when we had not all decided that after 5,000 years, there can be nothing new under the sun—that history, in the words of U.S. foreign-policy wonk Francis Fukuyama, is dead. Today, recycled trends come and go so quickly that there's no telling what the art of today is—and if Francesca Sundsten wants to paint in the manner of 1940s Magritte and Linda Christensen wants to paint as though she were 1960s Willem de Kooning, who are we to say them nay? Sundsten and Christensen, who are showing with five other women painters in "The Figure, Philosophy and Façades" at Diane Nelson Fine Art through Sunday, by no means have a lock on raping the past. Of course, we mean "raping" only in the nicest sense of the word.

Sundsten's paintings are the most fun in the show, and they're the best-painted. *Puppy Love Club* features a clinically obese couple seated on a rococo bench, the background as small as a Raphael countryside. Like an overgrown schoolboy, he wears a bow tie and knee socks up his blubbery calves. She is haloed, her nude body sagging about her knees like a sumo wrestler's. Sundsten's grotesque hyperrealism is akin to F. Scott Hess', but here, her two characters look modest and unassuming rather than corrupted from within. There is nothing sinister here—except maybe the viewer's palpable pity for these two, with their fat little feet and the touch of Modigliani to their long, soft faces. *Blue Boy* feels very like *Stranger in a Strange Land*. A small blue creature, his slightly distended belly too big for his slim body, stands cockily before a luxurious surfeit of English garden, with his hands on his hips in the manner of Victorian portraiture. Most of the blades of grass are delineated, though not as skillfully as Hess marking each dimple in an orange peel. Leaves reflect in the trough behind him. For someone with blue skin, he is insufferably smug. He needs to be caught by scientists and examined mercilessly for the freak that he is.

Sally Storch's oils are charming in a '50s New York or Paris café kind of way. They feel like stills from old MGM vehicles starring Rita Hayworth, and I can easily see them in a young Vassar student's boho atelier, circa 1956. In other words, they're breathtakingly bourgeois, in

the way Laguna art can so compellingly be. *Little Black Dress #4* shows a woman stepping into a shop to buy the dress in the window. *Her Mirror Image* shows a woman in a café with a man, her reflection in the mirror next to the table speaking for her, since her head is turned away from us. *Portrait of a Young Woman in Black* shows a woman walking down an empty street lined with brownstones. The daubs and dabs in browns and blacks are like chunkily painted Manets and Degases, most particularly in their celebration of those Suisse Mocha moments. They have almost all been sold.

I took issue with Elizabeth Solomon's framing of her lonely tables and doors: *Afternoon Shadows* was framed in a scratched, light-gold, '80s modern thing that should have showcased a tacky Nagel rather than Solomon's Matisse throwbacks. But most of the paintings inside those tacky frames—sad still lifes—are lovely. She has a modest sense of composition and does not cram objects in willy-nilly, but rather lets us focus on a single window *avec* dresser. *Still Life with Dishdrain* shows a clean kitchen sink. Hand-painted water tumblers dry in the dish rack; knives magnetize themselves to a strip on the wall. There is gray half-light.

But *Living Room* is too lived in: the lamp is lit, a magazine is open on a coffee table, knickknacks abound but do not illuminate the character (à la Louise Bourgeois) of the absent subject, who seems to have just left her easy chair to answer the phone or maybe fetch a snack cake.

Christensen works in the mode of '50s Abstract Expressionists, with the thickly scumbled paint of de Kooning and the geometricism but not the heightened color of 1910s French Fauves. And after all that, she gives her canvases titles like *Bike*, *Tourist* and *Sea Cliff*. *Flower Farm* is nice: it looks like Laguna Canyon, if Laguna Canyon were put in a blender set to "frappé." But we particularly liked *The Greeting*, which features a waving woman at the seashore, her '40s housedress flapping about her legs and her head a big, scrappy, bobbled orange mess, like John F. Kennedy's.

Cynthia Evans' li'l allegories rely a sight too much on puns fit for "humorous" self-help books. *A Marriage of True Minds #2* features a wedding portrait in flat, shadowless paper-doll style of a woman and her cat/bridegroom. Get it? Because cats are better for women than men! And there's even a funny book that says so! Because a cat will never tell you, "Gee, honey, you look fat in those pants," like a stupid man would! Am I right, ladies? Hmmm? I did, however, like *Sense and Sensibility* because it features a brain in a jar.

Inez Storer's dirty, layered collages seem to be half James Thurber and half guerrilla artist Becca, whose cartoon silhouettes adorn plywood construction-site barriers throughout LA. *Mine* features a dog on wheels, a head on a stool, and a dressing table with a framed picture of what's either a sailor or Chairman Mao. It's too bad Storer's junkyard ethic extends to littering her canvases with stenciled, spray-painted alphabets, illuminating nothing, because we dig anyone who throws simpering, studly sailors around, as she does in *Primo*. Maybe next time she could use a cowboy or two.

"The Figure, Philosophy and Façades" at Diane Nelson Fine Art, 435 Ocean Ave., Laguna Beach, (949) 494-2440. Open Sun.-Fri., 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sat., 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; and by appt. Through Sun. Free.