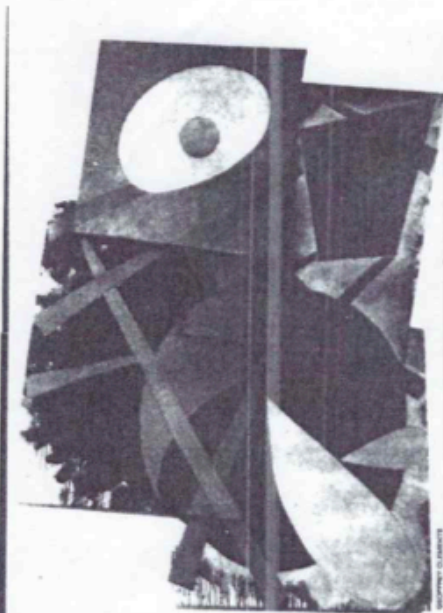


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Roberta Smith, "Hidden Manias," *Village Voice*, April 17, 1984



A goblet tips a most intimate domestic crisis; Elizabeth Murray's *Fly Fly*

Hidden Manias

By Roberta Smith

The Whitney's "Five Painters in New York" is the companion to its five sculpture exhibition of two summers ago. It is also another chapter in the museum's ongoing attempt to enhance "our collective understanding of the '60s"—as director Tom Armstrong's introduction calls it. And, nearly as I can tell, it's an attempt to deal with that decade and the five careers under consideration as expeditiously as possible—yet another example of the two-for-one birds-with-one-stone theory in action.

The artists called by this particular stone are Brad Davis, Bill Jensen, Elizabeth Murray, Gary Stephan, and John Terrence, with each being poorly served in somewhat different ways. The show's organizers don't give us too many clues as to the common terrain shared by Murray's busy-as-buzzards, surreal-cartoon abstractions on fractured canvases; Terrence's bewigged impasses on canvas, half-column, and small wood spheres; Stephan's elegantly cerebral abstractions of hierarchically scaled beams; Jensen's coiled organic forms barely contained by small, scarred surfaces; and Davis's knobby, fleshy wet-on-wet renditions of Oriental landscapes. Richard Marshall, who along with Richard Armstrong curated the exhibition, cites shared "sensibility and circumstance" as the theme, but denies a unifying "robust style." In his introduction, Tom Armstrong goes a little further, saying that these artists form "an important link between the

Still, it is largely left to the viewer to sort things out. In the catalogue, the artists are written about in separate but equal essays—poitely self-contained, surprisingly formalist. In the exhibition, each has a separate space where 10 to 12 years of art making are represented "in depth," but rarely does any one group of paintings seem much more diverse than a regular one-person gallery exhibition. The widely spaced installation, devoid of drawings, also increases the sense that we are simply in an unusually large solo gallery.

There are perhaps three angles from which to assess the show. First, one has opinions about the artists and the works selected. I think Stephan's painting is consistently overrated and that Terrence's is erratic and currently in transition; both are harmed by the lack of early work to set more recent efforts in context. Terrence is especially damaged (although so is nearly everyone else) by the absence of works on paper. Brad Davis should probably not be here at all. The P&D/New Image slot his work occupies would have been much better filled by Joe Zucker, Robert Kushner, or Kim MacConell.

Only Jensen's selection approaches the catalogue's "comprehensive consideration" and allows us to size up his accomplishment. But this is thwarted by the absence of really good recent work—one of the three larger paintings from his Washburn show last month would have helped. And generally, I think Jensen is

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be that smallness is becoming a stagnating, precocious device. Seeing *Lust*, a large encaustic spiral painting from 1970 done just before he went small—and seeing how well it has held up—suggests that Jensen should keep increasing his canvas size, and that his current mode may after all be a middle phase rather than his mature style.

In assessing the artists individually, the bottom line is that none of them is as accomplished at this stage as Elizabeth Murray, currently working at the top of her form. Her subject is the intimate domestic crisis—a tipping goblet in *Fly Fly*, coffee jumping out of a cup in *Yokohama*—but her style is so animated by thick dark-bright surfaces, blousy forms, and curvaceous, interlocking shaped canvases. Murray's inspiration over the years—in both drawing and painting—has been to animate the Cubo-Surrealist vocabulary with a scale and nearly cartoonish energy which is both American and popular in source, and her progress forms a series of elegant phases. Her work is ripe for a mid-career museum survey. While the Whitney has bestowed this honor on several men of Murray's generation—Naum Gabo, Tamiko Shiga, and—coming up—Borislyak, it recently passed up the chance to take an exhibition of her work being organized by the Dallas MFA and MIT's Hayden Gallery. That show will now go to the Broad Museum sometime in 1986.

A second approach to the exhibition is to consider whether it understands itself, which brings me back to the inclusion of Brad Davis's impenetrable work within what would otherwise be a provocative examination of abstract painting since the mid-'60s. Looking past Davis, you see the ways the other four painters perceived, exaggerated, and generally moved beyond formalism. Each took it to extremes, making it funnier, funkier, more accessible, vulnerable, or legible, and most of all, more packed with literal-illusionist tricks and tensions. What Murray, Terrence, Stephan, and to some extent Jensen, have in common is rather obvious, if not quite a "robust style." It's their sheer love of the expressive possibilities of that old modernist labor space—pictorial, illusionist space. Each puts the possibility of depth against some objective fact, surface bulging, three-dimensional shape, or concrete material, reconstructing order more the most malleable aspect of painting. In doing so, each has expanded the consciousness and reach of abstraction. These works reflect a crucial shift in painting which has implications far much more than just the Whitney's idea of "wide-eyed figurative subjectivity."

A third approach is to accept the curators' choice of artists without quibble, to recognize the museum's fears of losing its audience by putting all its eggs in one basket in a survey of either Murray or abstraction) and to sympathize, even, with its need to legitimize the '60s by making them a dress rehearsal for the Neo-Expressionist "moment" of the '80s. Accepting all this, one is then left wondering why the museum didn't go all out for these artists rather than settling for the current bland, half-hearted, half-full, half-revealing endorsement. (Even the lack of color in the catalogue becomes a sign of chastity and indifference.) What's finally most depressing is simply the Whitney's obligatory hands-off treatment. Its failure to build a convincing argument for its position.

Why don't we feel that Marshall and Armstrong threw themselves into their task with passion, wrestled with these careers, and emerged with the best and brightest of each artist's efforts? I ask this question knowing that art critics can have an easy time being Sunday morning curators, and realizing also that museum

York art world, subject to the most intricate and least escapable of pressures from above and beyond. No, conditions accompany my criticism.

Still, it's heart-breaking to consider what might have been, as well as what's here yet so hard to extract. There is hidden drama in the show—bits of the historical everywhere—but it's not brought out, or pulled together, or defended. It lurks in Murray's and Jensen's coiled or spring aprons, in Terrence's universe of thickly lead spheres suspended from the ceiling, in Stephan's growing perch for a blunt, strangely carpentered abstract trompe l'oeil, and even in Davis's nearly little colliding millimeters of high and low-know, of seal and seal.

Given larger, more varied, more densely detailed selections—comprehensive sequences of drawings, small paintings, and unknown early work—each artist could have looked much stronger and more convincing, could have helped articulate the weird, somewhat demented consciousness at the heart of the '60s aesthetic. Such an undertaking would have meant more time, thought, and (like the color in the catalogue) more money; it would also have spoiled the show's hygienic isolated look. But I suspect it would have paid off for both the art world and the Whitney's larger public. Perhaps a hint should have been taken from the General Corporation of the museum's recent de Kooning show. If there's sorting out to be done, it helps to start with more rather than less. (The Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, 370-3676, through June '84.)

A museum show not in the high-risk category of contemporary art is the Morgan's "Renaissance Painting in Manuscript" exhibition. The title may sound exotic and dry if confused to putting it repeatedly at the bottom of my list of must-sees, but the show is nothing short of stupendous. Consider it required viewing for anyone interested in the history of books and bookmaking, patronage and the growing habit, religious habits and expenditure among the titled and landed. Beyond that, it holds countless pleasures for those interested in painting, its narrative, its finely honed, nearly superhuman skills of rendering and depiction.

The exhibition is divided into Italian, Flemish, and French sections with regional differences maintained and transgressed as artists from different areas collaborated at single volumes. Everywhere the "latest" developments in painting are scaled down with no loss of grandeur, intricate borders reflect the current fashion in sculptural relief and architectural detail, and more than one artist is ambitious enough to dip into with text and border altogether. And everywhere things are condensed without seeming diminutive, presented to the eye with a one-up-oneness at once fitting and funny. Looking at these paintings, art appears to imitate art history, for they have the size and intimacy of color reproductions in Jan van Eyck's, but are the real thing.

The Italian presence: the greenish atmosphere here seen behind figures from Ferrigno (who has an illumination of St. Sebastian here) to Giovanni Bellini. The image of the great Flemish illuminator Simon Bening prefaces Brughel's treatment of the everyday labor of peasants in everyday landscapes. There are also lessons in restraint and patience, Raphael's grandeur, the Infante Don Fernando of Portugal, died before the manuscript tracing his lineage to the Ark could be completed, despite the efforts of two artists. Consequently, several of his large pages are uncolored and one is seen in outline only—an accident which illuminates the very process of illumination. (The Morgan Library, 36th