

guest slant picks by Nicholas Grider

Minimalism, Theatricality and You by Nicholas Grider

PORTRAITS

Carl Berg Gallery
6018 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA
90036

September 08, 2007 - October 06, 2007

Let me start by paraphrasing the gist of Michael Fried's famous anti-minimalism jeremiad *Art and Objecthood*: Fried argues that a minimal form like a cube or a grid of metal squares is essentially theatrical, requiring an audience to be present in order for the work to "function," and that previous art had an autonomy that meant a given painting still meant something even when you weren't standing in front of it—in other words, pre-minimalist art was a tree that, when it fell in the forest, did in fact make a sound.

I don't know what Fried would make of the current small-group of mid-career artists at Carl Berg, though, because while the work is for the most part figurative and unique and avoids reductions of ideas into forms (with the possible exception of George Stoll's sculptures, about which more later), the exhibit achieves an intricate and dazzling re-imagining of what a portrait does and means only if a viewer is there to make connections between the visually disparate works and her own relationship to them.

The most "traditional" of the three groups of works, Dan McCleary's realistic figurative paintings, is a good

place to start investigating this. At first glance, a double-portrait like *R and R*, one of the first images you see when entering the gallery, seems like a simple, traditional portrait of two men on vacation, one taking a snapshot of the other. Closer inspection reveals the many layers at work in all of McCleary's paintings though: just a few of these disruptions include the fact that the two men are standing too close to each other for the photo being taken to be useful as a snapshot portrait, the fact that the man being photographed is the one carrying the camera bag, the fact that both men are calm, bored-looking nearly expressionless—hardly the kind of moment you think of when presented with a scene of vacation picture-taking—and, most importantly, if you look to the right, you can see that the man being photographed is featured in another painting, as perhaps another person, in another double portrait of what looks like two incredibly bored travel agents or airline employees—professionals employed to present a photo-worthy perkiness at all times.

These kinds of fascinating slippages are all over McCleary's work, and turn a series of seemingly snapshot-based compositions into an insightful commentary on the boredom of both work and leisure, but in terms of these works as portraits, these paintings work exactly by their refusal to turn on easy figurative terms. Ultimately the viewer is left not learning something "deep" about either McCleary or the portrait subjects other than that their identity is up for grabs—they act as stand-ins for portrait subjects rather than portrait subjects themselves.

This quality of the "stand-in" is where McCleary's work joins together with the (superficially) very different paintings by Lucas Reiner. While McCleary presents a clean, generalized kind of realism, Reiner's portraits of trees push much harder both toward and away from a kind of photorealism often associated with portraiture. The single trees in Reiner's paintings are presented with a level of detail that marks them as specific individual trees, but they float against delicately-colored abstract expressionist backgrounds that recall Phillip Guston's early work. The tension between specificity and the general nature of the gestural backgrounds deliberately leads the viewer to think not just about trees as portrait subjects, but about what his or her own relationship with trees is in daily life. In a city that, from what I've been told, should be more or less bereft of trees, they form a constant backdrop to something else more dynamic and/or human in front of them. Reiner's decision to foreground the background has the effect of raising the question of where the viewer stands in relationship to the subject of a portrait, a question that both looks back to McCleary's stand-ins and, importantly, forward to George Stoll's simultaneously minimalist and painstakingly realistic sculptures.

Stoll's work has some roots in pop, in that it takes as its central subject the mass-produced object. But, while Warhol's Brillo boxes point toward endlessness and interchangeability, the handcrafted nature of Stoll's work and the shift in materials it often requires—toilet paper is made out of carved pine, Tupperware tumblers are made out of wax—points instead toward personal relationships with objects. Stoll's presence in the exhibition is what ultimately turns it from a very good painting show to a brilliant study of the meaning of "portraits" because ultimately, the portrait subject in Stoll's work is the viewer her- or himself. Whether or not the viewer has to be an audience, as in Fried's estimation, Stoll's somewhat-simplified objects provide the entire exhibition with a layer of critique that moves beyond a portrait as a performance of a particular person's identity to how that identity is ultimately determined by

the viewer. The result is a portrait of the viewer, a kind of cultural Rorschach inkblot test that, rather than telling us what goes on inside the heads of psychiatrists, opens up questions of what it means to look and be looked at in contemporary culture.

(*Images from top to bottom: Dan McCleary, *Portraits*, September 8 - October 6, 2007; Carl Berg Gallery, *R and R*, 2007, oil on canvas, 40 1/2 x 42 1/2 in, Courtesy of Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles. George Stoll, *Portraits*, September 8 - October 6, 2007; Carl Berg Gallery, *Untitled* (Ivory soap family pack), Lithographic multiple (Yumei Juan silk, Lithography ink and painted pine), 6 x 8 5/8 x 6 1/8 in, Courtesy of Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles. Lucas Reiner, *Portraits*, September 8 - October 6, 2007; Carl Berg Gallery, *On Walgrove Ave.*, 2007, oil on canvas, 14 x 8 in, Courtesy of Carl Berg Gallery, Los Angeles.)

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