



Painting: Not Dead Yet

Art Academy exhibits six Midwestern painters with a variety of styles

REVIEW BY JANE DURRELL

Art

Just as the Cincinnati Art Museum canters off in one direction — answering “What Is Contemporary Art?” with a series of lectures called *Not Painting* — its sister institution, the Art Academy of Cincinnati, opens an exhibition of contemporary painting. Variety, I think we can say, is one thing contemporary art is.

The Art Academy show, modestly titled *Midwest Survey: a Group Exhibition of Six Painters* — carries an important message: Good painting is being done today. Fifty artists submitted slides in answer to a call for entries; the six chosen all proved to be working in the Midwest, from Pittsburgh to Grand Rapids, and all happen to be academics. The first purpose of *Midwest Survey* is to give the academy’s painting students direct experience in what is going on right now. The public are incidental beneficiaries.

Two of these artists, Susanne Slavick and Sheila Finnigan, have shown in New York and consequently have more of a reputation than the others. Slavick’s impeccable panels, their surfaces almost enamel-like, toy with dualities and are eloquent against superbly painted abstract backgrounds. Four hands try to pull apart a grid in one panel; in another the grid has become a spaceship of sorts and only the soles of a pair of feet, suspended, provide a human element. A rope (a shimmer of blue against deep dark) is reached for in one panel; in another a rope may have been kicked away. A hand scatters, or perhaps accidentally drops, a shower of coins. Eight of these panels, each less than a foot square, are hung together. Of her other two works, also small but rectangular in shape, I particularly liked “Rhetoric,” in which an elegant red spiral (a royal, or perhaps ecclesiastical, shade of red) is being extended by what seems to be the spiral’s own hand.

Finnigan’s two triptychs are as big and sweeping as Slavick’s work is contained. In “Deposition” she takes on a classic theme and explores it in her expressionistic manner. A glare of white illuminates the central

century take on religious figures. Marilyn Monroe — who has proved a surprisingly lasting icon — appears, as well as someone who might be Andy Warhol, and the composition is literally tied together by a painted rope taut between a clothed harlequin at left and unclothed harlequin at right.

Jay Constantine could have been born on Frontage Road — he delineates the urban highway landscape in all its shoddy detail and frames it, sometimes, by the car window from which we see it. In “Commercial Strip Two” the same jumbled stretch is shown three times — in the light of morning, mid-day and evening — without ever assuming coherence and so saying something about the environments we make for ourselves. “Freeway Culture Three” goes to the countryside but shows he knows all there is to know on that subject, too: cast concrete, I-beams, chain link, the detritus of tires and roadkill.

Both Beth Edwards and Anita Dawson make paintings, of objects that speak of people. Edwards places a toaster, or shoes, stapler and tape dispenser, against a flat background which does, however, show shadows of the things resting on it, including the toaster’s electric cord. In “Dave’s Game” it is easy enough to read the symbolism of a baseball placed on a round red pillow, flanked by his boots and her pumps, but meanings are more remote in the gathering of desk accessories which includes a mirror reflecting a woman’s breasts. Dawson’s work spans a changing style; her earlier “Decline of Demeter” and “Heaven’s Gaze” are well-ordered compositions, but later, looser, perhaps more truly confident work is seen in “The Gardner” and “Waiting for Spring.”

The collages of Susan Sensemann are the most abstract of the works on view, employing upholstery material as their ground, the fabric still visible on the stretcher’s side. Elements of the original pattern, now painted over but visible in surface texture, are reworked and realigned in hard, flat pastels.

These artists are technically skillful, and