



Not So Sketchy

Artists prove watercolor is suitable for "serious" art too.

by Roberta Fallon

Watercolor used to be disdained as little more than sketchbook paint--easily portable and good for spur-of-the-moment visual note-taking in the studio or on a trip, but not for "serious" art. Today, though, watercolor is no longer a second-class citizen. Artists now use it for "finish" work as well as sketching. As you can see in Gallery Joe's 12-artist survey show "Water Color: Current Views," the medium fits nicely into delicate cartoon works as well as monumental abstractions.

If you've ever worked with watercolor you know it can be difficult and unforgiving. With oils or acrylics there's always a second chance--add more paint and work back into it. But watercolor requires a deft hand and confidence. Once the mark is on the paper, there's no covering it up. You either work with it or start over.

There are no mistakes on the walls here. Instead, virtuosity dominates, and there's something for just about every taste. Cheol yu Kim's two works stand out. The delicate depictions of what appear to be underwater or microcosmic fantasy creatures posing for their close-ups are cartoonlike, but cartoons of exquisite delicacy and sensuality. Made by using a variety of templates combined this way and that, Delta Quadrant 2 (1) and (2) are works that would lose their veiled mystery if they were translated into another medium. Their extreme delicacy of line works beautifully in watercolor, creating intimate biomorphic complexities--breastlike appendages and orifices that produce undulating streams of vapor--that are a little like soft-core bio-porn.

Photography has permeated the very fiber of the art world and seems to be in the driver's seat, even here in watercolor land. The photo aesthetic shows, whether the artists are working from photos or not. In all cases they're being aware of the photographed environment and translating it into paint.

Harrison Haynes' funny mountaintop scenes--there's one with a pickup truck parked under a carport--seem fueled by the snapshot aesthetic. They're breezy compositions translated into labor-intensive painted works. Charles Ritchie, who will have his first solo exhibit with Joe in February, produces believable works of photorealism. His Self Portrait With Night VIII is a darkling scene of the artist in his house, the whole picture reflected back through a mirror. It almost strains credulity that this virtuosic piece of realism was made from life and not from photographs.

Brian Murphy's three lush and drippy self-portraits seem to quote from paintings and photos. They remind me of Jenny Saville's lush self-portraits in oils. The focus on vulnerable pink flesh and the sketchy way the works drift off the page seemingly unfinished reminds you of watercolor's days as sketches for a finished product.

That the works--tacked to the wall and unframed--can be seen as finished pieces and not sketches speaks volumes about how far the modern eye has come in accepting what is art. And rightly so, for a frame doesn't make the piece. The piece makes the piece.

Also fine in a solid show are Amy Cartwright's illustrational minis and Charlene Liu's delicate scenes of life, death and decay in the woods.

"Water Color: Current Views"

Through Nov. 19. Gallery Joe, 302 Arch St. 215.592.7752. www.galleryjoe.com