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Art

REVIEW

Painting Emotion

Three painters bare their souls on canvas

By Michelle Weinberg

Why is it urgent to make a painting today? It's a question worth asking.

The technology of painting is as nuanced and responsive to an artist's imagination as the most sophisticated video camera and digital editing suite. Pictures can be as absorbing and variable as the latest participatory art forms based on social networking. Barely any taboos exist that would hobble an artist's freedom of expression.

Despite this, painting still struggles to free itself from being labeled an anachronism, a quaint hobby. Painters working now must admit they've fallen off the train of art history, which began during the primitive icon stage, rumbled through the development of oil paint and the transparent layering it made possible, past all that deep Renaissance space and dramatic lighting, which eventually succumbed to the industrial revolution that made manufactured paint in tubes readily available. The discipline of painting tolerated the intrusion of the camera, embraced it even, found that the camera's way of seeing was a way to challenge the outmoded social and economic stratification that was rapidly disappearing at the end of the 19th century and capture everyday reality. Abstraction and its many

isms accustomed us to admire the painting itself, to enjoy the rigor of its architecture, its formal structure. Eventually, each quality that defined painting could be removed — and was — and it could still be painting. Painting was big enough to handle all that. And now, when we find ourselves off that train, after painting has been distilled to its purest essence, artists can approach painting with absolute freedom from all that history. For art appreciators today, it can be confusing, but ultimately liberating, to be beckoned this way by one artist and that way by another. It can also be overwhelming to indulge them their obsessions.

Three painters of interest are exhibiting in Miami presently, and they each ask of the viewer something different. Miami artist Gavin Perry has painted a smart show called *Dead Century* that attempts to come to terms with the aftermath of all that history. With no particular urgency to recycle 1960s-era giants such as Frank Stella and Gene Davis, it feels like Perry just needed to see it for himself, test its validity on his own. The artist positions himself squarely outside the dead century of the title, looking backward to salvage what he finds useful. Perry has previously adopted themes and techniques from other, authentic subcul-

tures (custom cars, auto body paint methods) and compelled them to do his bidding. In the context of today's overheated art market, the use of silver leaf in his geometric abstractions does little more than confer a luxury value on them. The black lace Perry uses is more conflicted, more irksome, weirder and more interesting. It connotes mourning and sensuality, eros and thanatos in one cheap confection; when used as a background element, as it is in several works, it is tempting to read as a philosophical statement on the nature of painting, not just a sexy texture. The drawing elements in all the works consistently point to an endgame, a point of no return, in the heart of the picture. The fact that many of these works are drenched in resin renders them perfect, glossy, airless, embalmed and a little inscrutable.

British artist Paul Morrison, whose work is on view at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, like Perry, works within narrow formal constraints, exploring the possibilities of seeing plant forms. Operating like a scientist, he systematically analyzes his subject matter and exhausts its graphic permutations in strict black and white. The silhouettes of leaves and trees in various illustrational styles range from detailed, almost botanical illustrations to a carpet of scattered cartoon blossoms. He plays havoc with the scale of tree and plant forms in a single painting, so that a fern leaf can seem ominous as it overpowers a redwood trunk that is meek and diminutive by comparison. Morrison's work converses beautifully with a group of British pop painters, including John Wesley, Michael Craig Martin and Gary Hume, whose central aesthetic conceit is the use of graphic, contoured forms to deliver a blunt, deadpan humor. The new works Morrison shows here seem like slicker "product" than some of his more playful wall paintings. They overuse a contrived engraving effect. The sculptures here are reflective silhouettes of dandelions that rely too heavily on the simple irony that they are flat sculptures.

Elisabeth Condon's work is the most emotional of the three. For her, the canvas functions as a valid "arena" for action, a definition of painting exemplified by Pollock's spontaneous drip paintings 50 years ago. It is a place where the drama of an artist's highs and lows are played out. Condon clearly launches blows out of frustration and then coasts effortlessly



Elisabeth Condon's "Simultaneous Landscape" is showing at Dorsch Gallery through May 3.

during moments of grace, and it's all out in the open. Hypothesizing the coupling of Dr. Seuss and classical Chinese painting in her show titled *Seuss Dynasty* at Dorsch Gallery, Condon throws herself wholeheartedly into that unlikely intersection and wrests out of it a new terrain. Suspended particles of dry pigment in mediums are like muscular washes that become the animated contours of mountain ledges or rocks. The solid rock forms seem wispy and such quicksilver elements as atmosphere or clouds or water find a convincing corporeal reality. In *Simultaneous Landscape*, a free-form pour of translucent color sprouts nipple-like protrusions. In her passion, some of the smaller works cram too much in. The larger paintings are most successful at conveying the freedom to wander in a new land it appears she is after.

Gavin Perry's *Dead Century* is showing through May 5 at the Fred Snitzer Gallery, 2247 N.W. First Place, Miami; 305-448-8976. Paul Morrison is exhibiting his works through May 24 at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, 194 N.W. 30th St., Miami; 305-573-2130. Elisabeth Condon's *Seuss Dynasty* is showing through May 3 at Dorsch Gallery, 151 N.W. 24th St., Miami; 305-576-1278.

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