

Seeing Triple / Intimate landscapes, urban ghosts and oils larger than life.

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UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: Josette Urso, "Leaf Garden/Close," 2005, 8" x 6", oil on panel. Josette Urso: Landscapes/City Scenes Bianca Pratorius: Filmed Edifices Richard Currier: New Work

Gulf Coast Museum of Art, 12211 Walsingham Road, Largo, www.gulfcoastmuseum.org. All through April 23. At the Gulf Coast Museum of Art, three one-person exhibits prove how diverse painting can be. Richard Currier's enormous self-portraits and still lifes seem even larger juxtaposed with Josette Urso's tiny landscapes. Bianca Pratorius skillfully wields the medium of encaustic to give her paintings a hard, matte finish unlike Currier and Urso's glossy oils. All three demonstrate amazing skill -- and very different artistic visions. **Urso, the most established artist of the three, grew up in Tampa -- even attended King High School with future mayor Pam Iorio -- and graduated from the University of South Florida in the late '80s. Since then, she's called New York City home, often traveling domestically and abroad to paint and participate in artist residency programs. Many of the paintings in the exhibit originate from recent residencies in Ireland and Taiwan. Arranged in groups of 10 to 12, the several dozen small canvases read as an album of abstract snapshots -- a personal diary and travel journal. Some scenes are fully abstract, like a backyard at night transformed into a pattern of rectangles in blues and grays. Others reveal recognizable shapes, from windows to water tanks on city rooftops. The paintings' intimate scale -- some as small as 4" x 5" -- encourages close inspection. Lean in, and you see minute daubs of color and the intricacy of Urso's brushwork. Lush, textured gardens are rendered in a dozen variations of green; one smooth gesture creates a silver mountain. Reflective of quiet moments when landscape becomes a metaphor for self, the intimate oils convey a range of mood and personality. At times they are withdrawn, geometrical and monochromatic -- at other times playful, loose and vivid. Urso provides just enough visual information to shuttle the viewer between perception and memory. With familiar-sounding titles like "Jennie's Backyard" and "After Thanksgiving," the paintings become vessels for the imagination, encouraging participation. Urso proves adept at skirting the territory where intensely personal work becomes work of intense personality. Though she invites us into her private, reflective space, she expects nothing in return. Instead, the joy with which she paints becomes contagious.** Painter Bianca Pratorius also finds inspiration in the urban landscape -- in this case, Miami construction sites. The artist renders images of skeletal, half-built structures in encaustic, a technique of painting with melted wax. The milky translucence of the substance gives the paintings the delicate, washed-out look of old photographs and films. Building layer upon layer of melted wax and pigment, Pratorius conveys a sense of time and transition. The ghostly images are just as evocative of decay and decomposition as they are of birth and renewal. The color -- ethereal blues and fiery reds and oranges -- adds an element of the supernatural. In "36th St.," an edifice bathed in blue light channels a sacred temple. "Filmed Edifice P.A.C. 2" glows in pink and red. The choice of encaustic as a medium evokes its ancient heritage, and its durability. Portraits from ancient Roman times still bear bright colors though the civilization has long since crumbled. With stark beauty, Pratorius' paintings put our own culture into perspective as inevitably ephemeral, despite the drive to keep building. Richard Currier's massive, hyper-realistic oil paintings stand out in stark contrast to the other two bodies of work on view. Larger-than-life depictions of green peppers show details of wrinkled skin invisible in reality. A mango beaded with water reveals ultra-ripe flesh where a sharp wedge has been removed. Pressed beyond the point of believability, the painstaking details become symbolic. The pepper bends under the burden of mortality; the mango bursts with life. Imbued with an air of humanity, they suggest a division of life and death that corresponds to female and male. The same division continues in Currier's treatment of human subjects. In his self-portraits, he has painted his face, like the green pepper, with all the creases of well-worn leather. In a pair of unsettling images, he grimaces like a young Hannibal Lecter; in another, he calmly endures the threat of rising water. In contrast, two portraits of a woman convey classical serenity. Like a forest nymph, she seems at home being nude in one outdoor setting. In another canvas, she poses like an ancient statue, arms extended to encircle the moon. Technically, there's much to admire in Currier's paintings, but their brooding intensity swings between haunting and overwhelming. **I found myself returning to the gallery of Urso's work for a breath of fresh air.**

