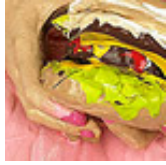


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The Unorthodoxy of Paint and Pencil



by Meredith Etherington-Smith

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The re-appearance of art based on the figurative, and executed with paintbrush and pencil, was very apparent at the ZOO Art Fair last year and has since threaded its way through many of the student shows. Which leads me to suspect that the decade-long orthodoxy that holds that conceptual or non-figurative art is the only game in town is finally losing its grip on London-based artists.

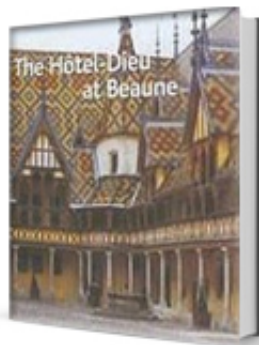
New shows this month continued the challenge.

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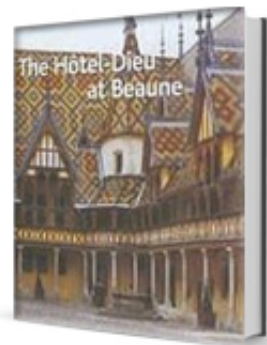
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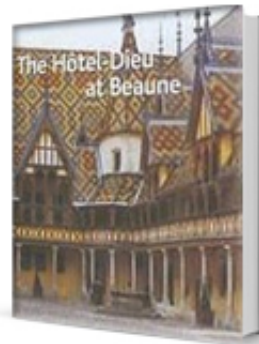
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First out was “Salon 2007: New British Painting and Works on Paper” at a new space on Portobello Road. Curated by Flora Fairbairn and Sotiris Kyriacou who really have their fingers on the pulse of the up-and-coming—this show combined both established and new artists and was deliberately curated, as Kyriacou told me, to suggest solutions to the figurative/non-figurative debate.

“It is also a tongue-in-cheek reference to the 19th-century Paris salon, when new Impressionist art was booed,” he said.

Works in the show were chosen for their solutions to the big art question of the moment: How do you paint, draw or make collages referring to figurative themes without looking old-fashioned or incurring the derision of the conceptual gang led by the Tate’s Nicholas Serota and his cohorts?

As this show amply demonstrates, paint and pencil seem to be gaining ground in the struggle. In particular, I preferred the painted pieces, finding the drawings somewhat thinner and less imaginative.

Adam King’s collage on paper *Flooded Landscape* (2005) was slightly reminiscent of Peter Doig’s early attempts at the figurative, but that didn’t seem to work against it—*Flooded Landscape* was snapped up by Charles Saatchi before the show ever opened.

Emma Puntis offered *Untitled*, 2007, a simple, almost casually painted portrait of a girl that was incredibly well observed. Meanwhile, Colin Allen’s exuberant *Flower* (2006), made by mixing acrylic, graphite powder, charcoal and paper, looked like a Fantin-Latour on acid. And I loved Nadine Feinson’s *Perfect Cannibal (Behind Erigena)* (2006), in which the paint seemed to fly across the surface.

I’d seen Oliver Clegg’s *omnia mutantur nihil interit* (2006) last year in a show he shared with sculptor Alastair Mackie, but his oil painting of a pram stranded in space still had numinous atmosphere.

And though I said earlier that many of the drawings lacked imagination, out of the collection, Chris Barr’s *Standard No. 8* (2006), made in pencil, ink, enamel and acrylic, showed surprising detail in portraying a

beautiful but sinister crowd.

So well done, Flora and Sotiris, for assembling a really excellent overview of emerging artists.

Boo Ritson cannot be described as emerging. In the two years since she left the Royal College of Art, this ex-advertising, late-start artist has built up a fine body of work that now is in some important collections—Saatchi, Zabludowicz, David Roberts and others in the United States, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany and Russia.

Using sculpture as her starting point, Ritson turns real people and objects into frozen images of themselves. First, she takes a person or object (for her new show, it's hot dogs and hamburgers) and embalms them in very thick paint applied with enormous confidence and painterliness. She then photographs them to create very large C-prints, in editions of 3, that are, to say the least, unusual.

In her latest solo show, "Hot Dogs and Heroes," at David Risley Gallery, Ritson introduces a new cast of characters, including three still-lives.

She has also incorporated more sculptural modeling light for the photography, which gives these bold portraits a subtle mien and throws Ritson's thick, confident impasto into bold relief.

But even though she uses real people rather than canvas as a basis for paint, make no mistake about it, Ritson is a painter, and a talented one at that. Real bodies rather than canvas represent a way to work with paint without going the flat-picture route—and it's a highly individual way to challenge the existing orthodoxy.

This, for me, was a great show, full of finely observed detail, such as the swirl of coffee in a paper cup. And even though its human subjects are subsumed by thick paint (and each wears sunglasses—a Ritson trademark) they are redolent of character and humanity.

Drawing at its height can be found at Hales Gallery this month, during Adam Dant's first solo show, "Menageries and Monuments."

Dant is a maestro with pencil, pen and sepia, and his frame of mind (similar, if one could visualize it, to a very full attic stuffed with centuries-worth of images) feeds his work with complex narrative images.

In this exhibition, he has taken the idea of an encyclopedic compendium and turned it into a visual form. This consists of numerous stories and pieces of information depicted together as part of a single pictorial scene—as first popularized by Pieter Brueghel in the 16th century.

Dant updates us here with a series of densely rendered chaotic narratives that unfurl in familiar and specific architectural spaces. For instance, you'll see guests at a fancy dress party form the Table of Evolution as they randomly tumble from a Bateau Mouche that has crashed through the glass roof of Paris' Natural History Museum.

Executed in sepia ink, these drawings are little masterpieces of the genre and show that drawing—pure drawing at its best—is still as relevant now as it was in Brueghel's time, when it is coupled with a contemporary imagination.

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