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Jim Nutt: “Trim” and Other Works: 1967-2010

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By Mario Naves

Jim Nutt’s paintings and drawings, subject of an adumbrated overview at David Nolan Gallery, are testimony, underplayed and undeniable to the vital role craft plays in generating aesthetic vitality.

For the past 20 years or so, Nutt has dedicated himself to portraiture—of a sort, anyway. His paintings of imaginary women isolated within dense fields of color combine Renaissance clarity, Surrealist scatology, Cubist abstraction, Persian concision, vernacular ornamentation, cartoonish elasticity and Vermeer-esque quietude. They are, in other words, a dizzying and unlikely amalgam of precedent; to Nutt’s credit, the amalgam is wholly organic. Works like “Trim,” “Pin” and “Plumb” signal an artist operating at the top of his game.

These recent paintings are exemplars of how eccentricity can be tempered and made resilient (or profound) by nuance. Certainly, there’s little that’s subtle about the work Nutt created during his 1960s tenure with the Hairy Who, an informal group of like minds centered on the Chicago Art Institute. Mining Freudian excess, comic strip brashness and the obsessive byways of Outsider Art, painters like Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Roger Brown and Ed Paschke created a mid-Western version of Pop Art—less epochal than the East Coast variant, perhaps, but what the art lacked in formalist detachment it made up for in idiosyncrasy, humor and, almost in spite of itself, humanity. Warhol is the icon, but Nutt is the artist. Who’s to say which history will favor?

Early pieces like “Miss Sue Port” and “Coursing” are slick, bright and brainy riffs on Miró, cut-rate advertising and the body as both a source of comedy and a site of confusion; these contrivances radiate with gleeful insolence. Colored pencil drawings from the early 1980s depict male-female relations with relatively predictable staginess, but they do evince an increasing technical facility—a characteristic that would gain in intensity with the portraits.

Viewers should bring a magnifying glass in order to fully appreciate Nutt’s astonishing dexterity as a paint-handler. His women are realized through infinitesimal hatchings of acrylic paint, deliberate and tender marks that accumulate into pearlescent fields of transitory color, shapes of sloping plasticity and, in the end, visages of uncanny restraint. An accompanying suite of pencil drawings pale when compared to a painting like “Pin,” a woman whose morphing features are a form of transmuted landscape or sexual congress. And that’s only the beginning of a web of allusions Nutt puts masterfully into place.