

The Pleasures of Density - Richard Rhodes

Ambera Wellmann's oil paintings are not big. Most measure less than 30 inches; the largest no more than 33 inches tall. Yet within these modest dimensions Wellmann brings together colour, gesture, texture and image to deliver concatenations of visual incident and layered art history that refocus the potentials of contemporary figurative painting.

The density of the work creates a perceptual pause that enhances the isolation of the pictures. The welter of marks and purposed decisions that make up each work take the viewer inside sophisticated image constructions where fluidities of identity and recognition resound within relatively small parameters. The unfathomable flesh form of her painting "Judith" for instance, challenges us to come to terms with what we see. It is a painting on a domestic scale but it shows us something that lies between a monstrous palpitating life form and a glazed ceramic model. Painting thrives on such indeterminacy. To see Wellmann telescope it with a compressed, fragmentary view onto the subject yet at the same time open the potentials of resolution so that the abject manages to ride side by side with the heroic is to feel engaged with painting that has serious ambitions to speak to human experience one picture at a time.

This is the case even when that human experience comes in the guise of the animals that recently have been subjects of her work. The animals mirror us by presenting a tacit innocence that we must engage. The gleam that cuts across the doubled subject of "Hare Hare" is a viscous gleam that puts us eye-to-eye with a pair of furred rabbits that might also be uncannily animated Easter ornaments. Everything is doubled or shadowed in the painting. The brushstrokes, the composition and form building and the fur textures carry our eyes across the surface of the picture and elide with the watchfulness of the rabbits. The play from surface to subject is like a meta-summary of painting's ever-elusive representational world and in this instance, while we look, their vulnerability becomes our responsibility

In "Wunde", which translates as "wound" from the German, another rabbit stands in alert silhouette. Fatty white areas of paint define nose, shoulder and arms. They bring a glistening wetness into the foreground of the painting that plays against the unreadable darkness of the background. The painting has a tonal authority worthy of Titian portraits (or Bacon's reprises of Titian) and that long curve of tradition plays into our regard for a rabbit. It does not seem a comic or childish figure despite its storybook roots. On the contrary, its startled attentiveness signals a general wariness that is underscored by the painted underlife of the figure where earlier vestiges of paintings appear. They register as signs of a scarred and flayed prehistory or, worse, an impending future that explains the wary verticality of the figure as it stands to watch while we stand to look.

Wellmann's paintings operate on doubled or trebled matrixes that manage to entwine what we see with how it is made. The overlays of image and paint turn each painting into a process that delivers a subject, then a resonating meaning and emotion. "Held" honours this ongoing condition of making. It shows us two hands, the lower one lost in shadow. They bear the same tension as the other subjects in her paintings. Their representational life is caught between convincing muscular torsion and the artifice of soft and rounded glazing. The top hand, the foreground hand, gathers the edges of a brilliant blue background. The curled fingers play it like an instrument. This invisible harp abruptly gives way to explosive gestures traced on a scumbled ground of paint. They are fingers finding the source of the picture, the beginnings that become an image. On other words, they play a song of paint. In Wellmann's hands, this is a song that gets ever richer.