

ART REVIEW

Concord explores 'Sight Specific'

By **Sebastian Smee** Globe Staff, July 3, 2014, 6:00 p.m.



Ron Krouk's still life "CD."

CONCORD — There are passages in the fiction of Philip Roth when you want to cheer, and others that make you feel hectored and bullied so that you can't get through to the next part quickly enough. A lot of the time you feel both things at once; it's the source of the stories' power.

One such moment — it leapt to my mind while viewing a wonderful show of figurative painting at the Concord Art Association — comes in Roth's 2000 novel, "The Human Stain." It comes in the form of a classic rant delivered by the novel's main character, Coleman Silk, a classics professor and controversial college dean who has been forced to resign.

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Railing against his former students, Silk laments their bland, flat-ironed minds, their inability to think independently, their thrall to cant of every kind.

“Their whole language is a summation of the stupidity of the last forty years,” says Silk. “Closure. There’s one. My students cannot stay in that place where thinking must occur . . . [E]very experience, no matter how ambiguous, no matter how knotty or mysterious, must lend itself to this normalizing, conventionalizing, anchorman cliché. Any kid who says ‘closure,’ I flunk. They want closure, that’s their closure.”

In Concord, the painter and art teacher George Nick has curated a show that celebrates a strain of painting that’s highly resistant, even immune, to closure. A kind of painting that forces the painter — and the viewer, too — “to stay in that place where thinking must occur.” As such, it’s a salutary alternative — a rebuke, you might say — to so many museum shows, which seem to think it obligatory not only to tell us what we are looking at but what to think, too.

The show includes works by painters who are well known locally (Harold Reddicliffe, Catherine Kehoe, Gregory Gillespie, Eric Aho, Chawky Frenn, and Nick himself), as well as some with more established national or international reputations (Philip Pearlstein, Alexi Worth, Richard Estes), and a handful of artists who painted in the 19th century, or earlier in the 20th (John Frederick Peto, Charles Demuth, and Nick’s one-time teacher, Edwin Dickinson).

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You could label it all “figurative art.” But don’t labels shut down thought? Even though the mid-century rhetoric that pitted American figurative artists against abstract painters could hardly be more out of date, “figurative painting” is a label that people still reflexively file away under categories like “conservative,” “traditional,” “regressive,” and “passé.”

Nick, without any sort of conviction, has plumbed for the clunkier label “perceptual painting.” (The show is called “Site Specific: A Selection of American Perceptual Paintings.”) It scarcely matters. As he himself has acknowledged, he might just as well have called the show “Nick’s Pics.”

As soon as you enter the galleries you know you have walked onto a lumpy, divot-strewn, uneven playing field teeming with anarchic, private visions. There may be an overarching vision, but each painting refuses to yield up its quiddity, its precious quota of independence. There are no explanatory wall labels, only titles, dates, and owners. And there is no discernible chronological or thematic unfolding.

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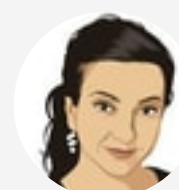
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Is it all figurative painting? I guess so. That's to say, I recognize things, people, buildings, weather, light. But I also notice abstract passages of great elan. I notice liberties, contrivances, approximations, fumbles, ideas, feelings, fantasies, and paint. Lots of paint.

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Siobhan McBride is represented by a small work painted last year called "Habitat." It shows a polar bear walking in a setting that seems to be part zoo enclosure and part Arctic wilderness. She has described her paintings as "views of a place where magic reveals itself differently than it does in the world." These scenes, she continues, "are tense with anticipation or blushing in the aftermath of an unseen event."

What a great manifesto for painting in general!

McBride likes strange encounters. But of course, good painting need not involve polar bears or imported fancies. A marvelous painting here by Ron Krouk, for instance, is simply a still life. Bread, two vessels, and a yellow carton of some kind arranged on a table behind a flat, reflective rectangular shape that might be an iPad or the case of the "CD" that provides the painting's title.

Painted thickly and with a cakey facture that suggests the pushing and pressing of a palette knife, the picture is riveting. The blue interior of one copper vessel chimes with the intense yellow carton (what is this package?), and together they animate colors and forms — shiny copper, warm bread — commonly associated with more conventional still lifes. The glossy surface of the iPad or CD case reflects darker shadows, hinting at frictionless digital visions — an antithesis to the slow, textured accumulations of Krouk's paint.

Two paintings by Pearlstein dominate the largest of the several galleries that make up the show. One, called "Two Nudes and Four Goose Decoys," depicts what the title declares in a composition brilliantly contrived and typically taut. Two relaxed female nudes, one seated and cropped at the shoulders, the other supine and seemingly asleep, are arranged on a decorative rug with four large wooden decoys scattered between them.

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Everything about the situation, and the placement of each figure or item, suggests the artificiality of abstraction, the painter pushing his ingredients in the direction of pattern and decoration. Notice, for instance, the overlapping circular shadows on the recumbent nude's stomach, which subtly rhyme with the circular patterns painted on

the adjacent decoy's foliage. And see how the shadows on the armpits of the other nude resemble birds' heads in profile.

The whole picture is an endlessly interesting exercise in the orchestration of positive and negative space, light and shadow, rhyme and disjuncture. But it doesn't end there, because Pearlstein's realism — his emphasis on the bony pits and hollows of his models, the tan lines on their chests, their long and vein-riddled hands — keeps us mindful of what one might call “ambient conditions”: the studio, the two models, the painter just out of shot.

Figurative painting is like this. Like fiction, it asks us to engage in a game that is part truth, but artifice. How do we resolve the two? We don't. There's no closure.

Pearlstein's pictures keep thinking in play.

There is a small but interesting bias toward trompe l'oeil (or trick-of-the-eye) painting in some of these works, and toward photorealism in others, triggering interesting meditations on the relationship between the two. Anyone doubting the difference, optically and perhaps even spiritually, between “eyeballing” something and photographing it might like to go back and forth between “Machapuchare,” a small photorealist painting of the Himalayan peak by Richard Estes (a brilliant artist, but not at his best before nature) and John Frederick Peto, the 19th-century master of trompe l'oeil.

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Richard Estes's painting “Machapuchare.” (RICHARD ESTES)

The Peto, behind which you can feel a thousand human decisions, is simply more compelling. Both are concerned with optical truth. But the Peto has one raised eyebrow — evidence of wit in motion. The Estes is not so much deadpan — deadpan implies wit — as blank.

Photographic ways of seeing (not the same as painting from photographs) do play into many interesting pictures here. Harold Reddicliffe's symmetrical rendering of a Selectron projector, for instance, makes great play with the idea of precision, both in painting and in optical machinery.

It's interesting to compare with similarly scaled paintings by Catherine Kehoe. Both Kehoe's and Reddicliffe's works vibrate with intelligence, with deep and active thought. Kehoe's works are the more mysterious, perhaps because in her work the finished painting (to return to Roth's terms) enacts the lack of closure.



Harold Reddicliffe's "Green and Blue Projectors." (HIRSCHL AND ADLER MODERN)

Reddicliffe's pictures are focused on finish; Kehoe's are thrillingly ambivalent. In parts of her work you recognize familiar objects, familiar conditions of light. But in each of her pictures here, you remain unsure of what it is she is representing.

In curating this show, Nick hoped to show, as he told WGBH's Jared Bowen, that this kind of painting, even if it doesn't get the kind of prestige extended to other forms of contemporary art, is "still valid, still going on."

"Valid" is a meaningless word. (What is not valid?) But you get the point: Figurative painting is "still going on." And at its best, it can still connect us, more intimately than just about anything, with everything in life that is knotty, mysterious,