

Sheila Finnigan Puts a Post-Pop Spin on History Painting

Sheila Finnigan, a much exhibited figurative painter from Chicago, whose work is characterized by the funky eccentricity for which the art of that city is known, called her recent exhibition at Pleiades Gallery, 530 West 24th Street, in Chelsea, "Iconomics." The title seemed an ironic comment on the fact that to be an iconoclast can be a lonely position in an era driven by celebrity worship and greed. Finnigan, however, probably wouldn't have it any other way, for the superficiality and rampant materialism of America today gives her much to react against. Indeed, her work benefits immensely from a jaundiced view of recent history that she expresses in a style for which she has coined the term "Cross Pop Culturalism."

Here, as in her earlier solo exhibition in the same venue a little over a year ago, Sheila Finnigan presented Andy Warhol as sort of Pop ringmaster, presiding over the exhibition with his rag doll persona and mop of silver hair—particularly in one full-length portrait where he stands in a bowl of Campbell's tomato soup beating on an old army drum. In her more recent exhibition, however, other icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy shared center stage with Andy, creating the sense of a three-ring mausoleum for media manipulators and martyrs.

In a group of three large compositions that Finnigan dubbed "American Dream," each of these personalities was painted reclining on an antique chaise lounge in the manner of the French neo-classicist painter Jacques-Louis David's "Madame Recamier." David, of course, is an auspicious painter for Finnigan to identify with, since he invented a new kind of history painting, concerned with current events rather than ancient or mythological ones. In her previous solo show at Pleiades, Finnigan painted Warhol after David's famous 1793 masterpiece "The Death of Marat," in a rocker rather than a bathtub, with Campbell's tomato soup substituting for blood. In the new painting, there's a Campbell's soup can on the wall behind Andy as he reclines as languidly as a Matisse odalisque on the chaise with a paintbrush in one hand.

Real blood rather than metaphorical tomato soup mars the same pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat that Jackie Kennedy wore on the day of JFK's assassination, as she lounges like a grieving ghost on the same chaise lounge as Andy in another large painting by Finnigan. Nearby is a shadowy picture-within-the-picture of Lee Harvey Oswald brandishing his rifle, eerily accenting this memorable tribute to our most glamorous modern widow.

The proximity of Finnigan's painting



"American Dream: Marilyn Monroe"

of Marilyn, JFK's one-time mistress, occupying the same chaise lounge while holding a rose, near a lampshade decorated with red pom-poms worthy of a bordello, creates symbolic symmetry, commenting on how the private soap operas of the rich and famous become public spectacles in our age of instant history spewed out for a ravenous public by an omnipresent and obliging media.

Finnigan's strong moral streak informs such imagistic juxtapositions with multiple layers of irony and meaning, which are enhanced by her habit of including some of the dramatic props seen in her paintings as installation elements in her exhibitions. In her previous show, an actual picnic table littered with empty Campbell's soup cans and party balloons seemed to signify that the party of Pop idolatry had ended; here, along with the old army drum seen in the aforementioned Warhol portrait, the main prop is the chaise lounge that appears in the paintings after David, sitting empty and adding to the overall mood of elegy—not so much for the individuals depicted as for all that they once signified in the public imagination.

Other icons such as Albert Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci (the latter a rare departure from modern subject matter painted in tribute to fellow Chicago Imagist Ed Paschke) are depicted in much larger than life close-up portraits that, while less complex than Finnigan's allegorical compositions, call even more attention to her painterly finesse. For in these works, the "action" is in the manipulation of the paint itself. Finnigan often works on pastel cloth rather than canvas,

employing a unique mixed media technique to produce "blurred" effects that lend her paintings an exhilarating fluidity. The technique enables her to transcend the pigment-clogged clichés of Neo-Expressionism, even while employing spontaneous gestures and drips to lend her compositions a sense of movement and immediacy.

One of the most exciting works in the present exhibition, in terms of its historical sweep, is the diptych called "Pop!" The title, although something of a double entendre, refers to a popping balloon in the picture, signifying dashed illusions or hopes rather than the art movement to which Finnigan appears to feel a somewhat ambivalent affinity. The composition presents a procession of figures resembling a Medieval parade of fools, even while including among its ragtag company geniuses and statesmen such as James Joyce, Albert Einstein, and Winston Churchill.

Also woven into the mix are a bull recalling the gored beast in Guernica, an Egyptian mummy, figures personifying ancient Greek and Aztec civilization (with an emphasis on the ritual bloodletting of the latter), among other disparate symbols of humankind's eternal folly. Although revealing roots in the raucous Chicago Imagism of older artists such as June Leaf, Ellen Lanyon, and Seymour Chwast, this ambitious multi-figure historical frieze is tempered by the post-Pop irony mixed with wry humanism that sets the art of Sheila Finnigan apart.

—Ed McCormack