

ART Là-bas

“The Fiction of Flowers” (on Roland Reiss’ “Floral Paintings and Miniatures”) by Douglas Messerli

THE FICTION OF FLOWERS
BY DOUGLAS MESSERLI

Roland Reiss “Floral Paintings and Miniatures” / Los Angeles, Diane Rosenstein Gallery, December 11, 2014-January 17, 2015. I saw the show with Howard Fox upon its opening on Wednesday, December 11, 2014.

In the midst of a long career of painting abstract canvases and sculpture,* Los Angeles artist Roland Reiss was drawn in the early 1970s to elements of Conceptual Art, discovering what Howard Fox described in his 1979 show, “Directions,” at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden as “new possibilities for himself in its content-oriented representationalism.”



Particularly affected by the advent of holography, Reiss perceived, as Stephanie Baron quoted him at the time, that the hologram “alters our whole mode of thought.....[it is] an effective tool to comprehend content out of abstraction.” A hologram implied that “everything is transparent and accessible, that it can be seen over, under, across, through, in effect, it gives the illusion that one can really enter it.”

During that period Reiss temporarily stopped painting abstractions in order to focus on what he would later describe as “miniatures,”** small Plexiglass encased environments that presented tableaux-like scenes of what might first appear as stage or movie sets.

According to Fox, these pieces did not call up any particular “story,” but stood rather as what Reiss described as “static fictions” that served as the basis for imaginative constructs for ideas as opposed to any narrative purpose.

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I would argue, however, that these works are quite narrative in their effect, but that the narrative structures they imply are simply not those of standard narrative fiction. Like the aurally-created fictions of talk-artist David Antin, they stand as narratives in which “story” has been erased along with most of the other elements we usually associate with story or plot: character, coherent action, locale or specific place, dialogue, etc. Indeed, we are asked to interpret works such as the “Dancing Lessons” series, *The Reconciliation of Yes and No* and *Unfinished Business* (both from 1977), as if they were narratives. In the former piece, we are invited by the title to explore, for example, the balances (the “reconciliations”) that have been achieved throughout the tableaux in terms of its palette (yellows, greens, corals or oranges) and the variations of plant life, the pots in which they have ensconced, and the balances achieved by the placement of chairs and the vertical and circular forms, etc. If we cannot precisely read this work—since, as in most of the works by Reiss there is simply too much going on to tie together the “events” implied with any *one* interpretation—we are, nonetheless, encouraged, perhaps even *required*, to look for narrative signs. The 27 tableaux of the “The Dancing Lessons” series, as Fox perceived “demand of the human imagination to create meaning, however indulgently or however compulsively, from the world around us. If we cannot specifically evolve a coherent narrative, we recognize that we have been asked to attempt to create one; it is simply that in Reiss’ “fictions,” the narrative has been exploded or erased. Hence the feeling we get from many of his miniatures such as *Unfinished Business* that we have stumbled upon the evidence of a mini-apocalypse or, at least, a titanic battle, the causes of which are outwardly unknowable. Like clueless crime detectives we feel the need to try to reconstruct the reality that existed prior to our discovery of this seemingly static world. But in that fact we necessarily impose a fictional reality upon the work, as if what is now a frozen three-dimensional snapshot of evidence, was once something else, a world perhaps peopled by individuals who “had business” to enact and did so with catastrophic results. In short, the work insists upon a narrative; it is only that we cannot ever completely know it unless we bother, over hours of study of the tableaux and intellectual consideration, to re-create its reality. In other words, Reiss’ work *does* have a narrative, but its “story” will be different for each viewer and can never be entirely known or, perhaps, even made completely coherent—which reminds us, in some ways, of the complex detective scenarios of *film noir* such as *The Big Sleep* or the more recent (what I describe as a *film soir*) *Inherent Vice*. This

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association has particular significance when we recall that Reiss' earliest miniatures involved newspaper accounts and television coverage of crime scenes.***

While continuing to produce his determinedly abstract works, Reiss embarked in 2007 on what may appear to be an artistic voyage in an entirely new direction, but which, I would argue, resonates with the fiction-making tendencies of much of his art. The new works, represented in the Rosenstein show, are stunningly beautiful floral paintings, the earliest of which is *Paradisium* (2009) and most of which were created within the past two years (2013-14). If these works, one more, seem to take the artist along a different trajectory, Reiss himself counters, as critic Lita Barrie notes in her essay "Exploring Spatial Depth: Roland Reiss' Floral Paintings," that he "aimed to put everything [he had] learned about painting into a painting."

At first glance, one observes in these works amazingly colorful tributes (obviously, as Barrie suggests, employing Reiss' knowledge of the "iridescent color dynamics" we find in his abstractions) to the floral world. We immediately recognize, however, that Reiss' floral visions are somehow different from, say, Jane Freilicher's pots of flowers (the recently deceased artist whose numerous floral works are representationally placed within a domestic setting but are also spatially located in more formal vertical and horizontal arrangements). Although Reiss' flowers surely signify a three-dimensional reality, they more importantly explore, as Barrie observes, "the two-dimensional surface on the wall."

As in the miniatures, Reiss returns in his discussions of these works to the important distinction between art that is large and small. "We can choose to live in a large space or a small space. It is a powerful metaphor in how we see the world" (quoted by Barrie). And although these paintings certainly cannot be described as "miniatures" (their dimensions being, as in *Paradisium* and *Vertical Garden*, 68 x 52 inches) we are, as with the miniatures, encouraged to carefully look into the tangle of blossoms, leaves, and roots in order to make sense of these obviously tactile images. For we immediately realize that most of these floral gatherings, with the exception perhaps of *Domestic Setting* (2014), exist neither in a controlled human environment nor in a natural one, but thrive in a world of the artist's own creation, moving out, in some cases such as *Lilies in Blue* (2014) and *Pacific Dance* (2014) in horizontal configurations, but more often presented in vertical patterns, as the flowers "dance" up and down the canvas, both stems and blooms sometimes moving in opposite directions as in *Sunflowers After Dark* (2013) and *Sunflowers At Night* (2013)—perhaps as they are pulled equally by lunar forces.

If the first thing one notices about these works is simply their beauty—the nearly luminous appearance the flowers themselves—one quickly notices that a great deal else is going on within their canvases. Barrie nicely captures their quality:

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In the Floral Paintings, Reiss uses the flowers as a scaffold to create in-between spaces where surprising things can happen. The flowers float in the center of these paintings like a galaxy. Reiss juxtaposes multiple perspectives of space, as both flat and infinitely deep. Viewed from afar, the human-scale flowers, bursting with vibrant translucent color, are experienced in a body-scale relationship. Viewed from a close focus, tiny surprising details are discovered in the gaps between the flowers. The play on large and small scale, telescopic and microcosmic perspectives, resembles a zoom camera lens that keeps the viewer's attention moving up, down, around, and across the painting, making perceptual connections between the "clues" in the background details and the beauty of the dramatic flowers in the foreground.

Just as in the "miniatures" Reiss provides these works with an astounding amount of information: a jungle of root and leaf patterns, the placement of architectural sites and what appear to be tourist monuments and destinations, along with a whole complex of "other" signs and even symbols that inexplicably forces us to create or, at least, imagine interrelationships between the floral bouquets and the artist's and our own relationships to them. Did the artist first encounter the flowers depicted in, for example, *Human Nature* (2012), within the city landscapes that appear embedded within the nettles and thorns and other "spider-web-like" structures surrounding these colorful roses, or is the artist simply suggesting that it is human nature to "associate certain thing with certain things." (as Katherine Hepburn keeps describing her amazing ability to remember details in the movie *Desk Set*). In large, it doesn't matter, for we necessarily do begin to associate the details *behind* the flowers with places and events, and, in so doing, without even knowing it, we transform Reiss' paintings from a flat space into a work of multi-dimensionality. Perhaps we cannot



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help ourselves, particularly given Reiss' encouragement, from transforming the more abstract patterns surrounding these flowers into the representational reality reflecting our own experiences in time and space.

As with Reiss' miniatures, accordingly, we peer into these lovely bouquets not merely as mute observers but as inherently interested beings intent upon reading the fiction the flowers seem to hold out before us. By imposing subtle clues within and among these natural images, Reiss reveals that as a species we cannot remain disinterested. Similar to the Hudson River School painters, we inevitably "read into" the world around us, imbuing it with meaning that, in the abstract (the world of forms and shapes) it does not truly contain. In that respect, there is, Reiss suggests, no such thing as "pure form."

Even the artist's abstractions call attention to the fact that under the human gaze, every stroke of the brush is pulled into significance, becoming something like "short stories." As Howard Fox writes of Reiss' 1960s abstractions such as *Orbit*, *Cosmologic*, *Hyper Space*, and *New World* (all of 1968):

Their abstract imagery often suggested squiggly forms floating in a field of color, as if adrift in outer space. Unlike heavenly pictures from the Renaissance or baroque periods, with fictionalized lofty clouds magically supporting human-like portraits of God, the resurrected Jesus, assorted angels, or classical deities, all calculated to impress the human imagination with moral man's relation to the immortal realm of the higher world, Reiss calls upon no depictions fictions, or illusions. What you see is what is literally there to see, not an imaginative illustration of something else or someplace else. And yet Reiss enlists the viewer's imagination by provoking associations with his formal vocabulary and our own habitual, nearly unconscious, visual conventions. A squiggly form placed in a field of colored fiberglass is no depiction of an astronaut floating in space—and certainly not an image of everyman in the existential void—but it has the capacity to evoke such liminal thoughts in viewers. (from Fox, "Painter at Work")

If even his abstract works necessarily call up "liminal thoughts," how much more powerful are those hinted at in his floral landscapes—satellites, monkeys, waterfalls, and other minutiae intertwined within his multi-colored roses, sunflowers, lilies and

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other flower—in helping us to respond by “reading” the fictions of his flowers? And it is, perhaps, for that very reason that we perceive Reiss’ works as so irresistible, an art to which we want to return time and again.

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**One might ask, particularly in Reiss’ case, just what *is* abstraction? As many artists have long-argued, abstraction might be something only in the eye of the beholder. For example, if one were to paint or photograph the pools of water and random collection of stones and other debris along a beach, would it represent a representational landscape or an abstraction? What might appear as a collection of various circular and rectangular forms could also be perceived as a depiction of a real-life scene. As Howard Fox has observed of Reiss in the critic’s 2014 essay on his *oeuvre*, “asked if he intended to produce such highly divergent bodies of work spanning decades, Reiss replied that he saw all his art as arising from an ongoing mind-set, an evolving continuum of interests and explorations rather than a cavalcade of disruptive reinventions.” (“Painter at Work: Roland Reiss’s Studio Odyssey”) Fox also points to early, abstract-like landscapes by Reiss, which predate his more completely abstract works. But throughout his career, Reiss has continued to title his abstract artworks with names such as “Mountain of Sand,” “The Inquisitor,” the *Silver Lake* series, and, most notably, the “Short Stories” group of acrylics on canvas from 2001.

*Somewhat oddly if predictably, Reiss first denied that he was a miniaturist, arguing that the smaller scale simply suited his purposes better than a large-scale installation, because they forced the viewer to think about them rather than to enter and engage with them. Yet these pieces later (or perhaps simultaneously) came to be called “miniatures.”

***Fox writes of these early miniature influences, quoting curator Betty Ann Brown from “Roland Reiss, Art & Life,” in *Roland Reiss: A Seventeen Year Survey* [exhibition catalogue] (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1991).

Both Fox’s essay “Painter at Work” and Barrie’s “Exploring Spatial Depth” appear in the catalogue for the Reiss retrospective exhibition at Begovich Galley, California State University, Fullerton, curated by Mike McGee.