

DIANE ROSENSTEIN

THE HUFFINGTON POST

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Roland Reiss: Art Review by Peter Clothier (December 19, 2014)

A good half-century after it started, Roland Reiss's career continues to surprise and delight in a new exhibition at Diane Rosenstein gallery. The last time I caught up with this artist's work, a couple of years ago, he was already painting, um... flowers -- a bold, provocative gesture, fraught with professional risk in a culture in which the mainstream could reliably be expected to sneer at such an enterprise. The paintings were beautiful, studied, quite formal in presentation -- and the last thing I would have expected from a contemporary artist at the peak of an already distinguished career.

To judge by his current exhibition, "Floral Paintings and Miniatures," Reiss has been working hard to extend the boundaries he himself had begun to establish in those early floral paintings. These new, large-scale works are painted with the same meticulous attention to detail and the same exemplary skill. Formally, they create the illusion of symmetry without being exactly symmetrical...

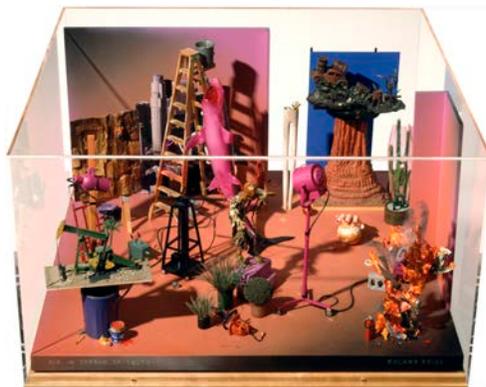


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Formally, too, they work as exhaustive exercises in the delicate art of color composition. Lilies, sunflowers, birds-of-paradise, roses, these floral images float against flat, monochrome backgrounds enhanced with cut-outs and stencils that contrast their natural beauty, with quiet irony, with cultural icons of the contemporary world: the silhouettes of cityscapes, for example, or images that seem to reference the familiar excesses of the art market. In a nod to Manet -- and perhaps, to this viewer, to the meditative serenity of Buddhist practice -- one quartet of paintings depicts the lovely form of lotus blossoms and the outline of lily pads, seen directly from above; and beneath, or perhaps more accurately behind them, as though in the water of a pond, lurk the barely discernable forms of variegated koi fish.



As I perused the surface of these paintings, I was struck quite unexpectedly by their aesthetic continuity with the other components of this exhibition: a handful of the exquisitely constructed miniature dioramas that brought the artist considerable renown some decades earlier.



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Wrought with the same passionate dedication to detail and the same exacting craftsmanship, these three-dimensional mini-dramas required (and continue to require, in the examples included here) the same kind of exploratory looking: the two-dimensional surface of the paintings offers the same kind of visual complexity and invites the same kind of pleasurable detective work as the dioramas. The viewer's eye and mind are drawn into an act of (act-ive) contemplation, moving through surfaces and between objects in a constant voyage of discovery.

When I used, above, the word "delight," I intended it as an accurate description of the actual physical sensation that this artist's work arouses. As viewers, we feel constantly invited in, in a way that makes the work, beyond its intellectual engagement, a rare experience of sheer, genuine pleasure. If the paintings glow with their own peculiar serenity, we find ourselves irresistibly glowing with them. In today's troubled world, such a gift is not to be taken lightly.