

art and cake

Roland Reiss, Unrepentant Flowers and Miniature Tableaux

at Diane Rosenstein Gallery

Through June 2

By Nancy Kay Turner

"Choosing beauty over content (or choosing beauty as content) is always an act of sedition." Dave Hickey

"Truth is Beauty, Beauty is Truth..." John Keats

Roland Reiss, the venerable and much beloved artist, has an engaging exhibition at The Diane Rosenstein Gallery entitled "Unrepentant Flowers and miniature tableaux." There are really three distinct bodies of work here – a coolly elegant series of five nearly all-white, large-scale paintings with delicate twiglike flower stems, half a dozen mixed-media dioramas related to his 1980 body of work entitled "Morality Plays," and the eighteen flower paintings that give the exhibition its title.

In the canon of figurative painting, the humble still-life occupies the bottom rung of the aesthetic ladder. Flower paintings (or floral arrangements), especially in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, have long been regarded as lowly kitsch, with the possible exception of Georgia O'Keefe's large-scale eroticized flowers and Andy Warhol's intentionally messy silk-screened single flower images endlessly repeated like wallpaper (or actually used as wallpaper).

Roland Reiss's unrepentant and unapologetic flower paintings are as much about the history of painting and criticism as they are about the subject itself. Here flowers in a vase become a vehicle to explore (among other things) the notion of serial imagery, which was invented by Claude Monet, perfected by Josef Albers and heavily exploited by Andy Warhol.

Serial imagery, a visual version of set theory, requires uniformity. The images are nearly identical – except for color changes – and therefore the concept of progress is non-existent as the images become interchangeable, eliminating any visible marker that might indicate the passing of time. The flower paintings here are all (with one exception) medium size (30" x 24"), oil and acrylic on panel and are all painted in the last two years.

Unrepentant Flowers: Indigo Blue, 2018 oil and acrylic on panel. 64' x 52", one of the few larger works, is a lush amalgamation of hothouse flowers that echo the highly saturated colors of nineteen-sixties Op Art and Pop Art paintings. The flat, unmodulated background and the crisp hard-edge between the figure (flowers) and ground almost seems silk-screened with no brushstrokes visible. Each leaf and stem appears lit from within –almost like neon. This is achieved by the color relationships (a nod to color field painting) between the blue-gray core of the stem with the slightly mauve-gray surrounding it. Then there is a green that appears to light up the edge. This is very sophisticated color magic. The vase is composed of organic, wavy shapes that look like a sixties Fillmore West music poster. Although there are occasionally slight shifts in the shape of the vase, the structure of all these works is nearly identical and

they are all ruminations on the history of painting and art criticism. Implicit in this vibrant, accomplished body of work is the argument for bringing back the notion of beauty to painting.

A series of five large-scale oil, acrylic and vinyl on panel paintings are in direct contrast to the other brightly hued dynamic flower paintings. Each is predominately a wintry white on white painting with barren twigs in one or sometimes two highly simplified vases. Reminiscent of Chinese painting in its simplicity and elegance, these seem more metaphorical somehow. Each is entitled American Still Life I, II, III, IV, with the last one entitled *Chinese Still Life*.

The background in all of these has an accumulation of large purposeful scoops of paint that are so thickly applied that they themselves become sculptural objects casting shadows. These juicy scoops are carefully placed around the centrally located vase and twigs – though in the Chinese still life there are some blooms on the twigs suggesting regeneration and new life. These are meditative Zen-like works that might have been better served in a bigger gallery space where they could be shown further apart and seen from a distance. These demand sustained and quiet viewing to discover and reveal their secrets.

While the paintings are intriguing, Roland Reiss's miniature tableaux are a delicious and fascinating commentary on our wildly consumer society and what all of our "stuff" might say about us. The original series entitled *The Morality Plays* was from the profligate nineteen-eighties which was bull market heaven. Art was large and getting larger – eventually monumental. Schnabel was breaking dishes, Basquiat was walking on his works accidentally and letting the shape of his footprint show and Roland Reiss – ever the maverick was digging down and creating extremely labor intensive (with the help of a group of assistants whom he credits) precise, tiny, narrative art.

A storyteller and a myth buster, Reiss masterfully choreographs these profound investigations into the human psyche by way of our relationships to physical space, to inanimate objects and sometimes even to each other. Each of the six mixed-media tableaux is 14 x 36.25 x 8 inches and is affixed to the wall, leaving three sides for the viewer to look through. Each one displays a contemporary living area that is filled with different objects. For example, in *The Morality Plays: Barbequium*, 1980/2018 (a witty invented word for barbeque) all is not normal. For one thing, the barbecue is inside the living room on the couch with smoke drifting lazily upwards. The room is littered with raw and cooked meat, corn on the cob wrapped in tin foil, fixings for salads, bottles and cans of beer and soda. Not a single soul is nearby. On a faux marble post is carved the provocative word "confession." Are we to confess to gluttony? Obviously one thinks of the religious connotations with the confessional a part of Christian service. Confession used to be a private event to relieve guilt about shameful or forbidden activities. But nowadays people confess on television or in tell-all memoirs. It's become almost chic to have something awful to publically confess. Words like "compromise," "patience," "sincerity" and "fellowship," appearing in some of the other works, read like a self-help manual. While *Monetarium* looks like the Gordon Gecko character from the nineteen-eighties movie "Wall Street" or some corrupt public officials could comfortably live there amongst the stacks of money and gold bullion strewn around. Like the original morality plays which were allegorical dramas performed in Europe in medieval times, these small theatrical tableaux are intended to focus the viewer on the wretched excess of wealth and the unnecessary clutter of their worldly possessions. This is nothing less than a call to arms for us to reclaim our shared humanity. Roland Reiss's sly wit (he hangs miniature versions of his paintings over the mantelpiece), masterful craftsmanship, elegant aesthetic and restless imagination are everywhere apparent in his thoughtful sculpture and his iconoclastic paintings.