

The Highlights - Margaret Wall-Romana at Bucheon Gallery

Margaret Wall-Romana, *The Spaces*,
Oil on canvas, 62×92 in, 2005-2007.

More years ago than I care to remember I cut my teeth, both as an artist and as a critic, to the writing of Dave Hickey. As an under-graduate I recall being immersed in the debates about beauty that followed the publication of his book *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (1997). Later, as a rather callow graduate student, myself and others attempted to deny the influence of beauty by raising 'The Ugly' as an alternate model. After nearly ten years, why is it that overtly beautiful, highly intelligent paintings still manage to throw me back to that moment when I was forced to consider beauty as an agent of aesthetic revolution instead of the saccharine coating used to disguise lack of content.

Margaret Wall-Romana uses the language and history of aesthetics across and through cultures. For example, two of the pieces in this exhibition are cruciform shaped, but the internal formal logic of the paintings, particularly the work *Parentheses (Becoming)*, suggests classical Chinese landscape scrolls. Abstract washes evoke atmospheric perspective through which more concrete images are glimpsed and finally coalesce on the artwork's surface as an elegant vine. The viewer is caught in a maelstrom of energetic, curving brushstrokes that carry the eye to the tip of the vine, completing an imaginary sweep across the outstretched arms of the canvas.

The painting *Violet Marsh* reads like the poetry of Byron and Shelley. The colors are dark and bruised, purples and lilacs predominate, and the work is achingly Romantic. It is a pastoral nature morte, with a bird, presumably dead, emerging from the stillness at the bottom of the painting. Birds appear in three of the works in the exhibition, but it takes a while to unearth the caudal strokes that eventually become a creature in *Parenthesis (Here and There)*. The eye settles first on an almost centrally placed wreath, variously formed by abstract marks and highly resolved images of squash blossoms and peonies. *The Spaces* draws on the voluptuous genre paintings of Fragonard. The work is a diptych in which atmospheric washes of rosy pinks, grayish silvers, and baby blue hues suggest distant lands. It is these spaces through which the viewer travels to arrive at the carefully rendered images of a fallen sparrow and a delicately delineated set of beheaded roses. The blossoms are strung upon a line as if to wither and desiccate like the fallen bird below them.

Not every narrative here ends with careful illustration. What complicates and makes the work more interesting is that Wall-Romana uses the nature of paint itself to not only suggest

beauty, vulnerability, and infinite space, but also to negate those ideas. The cracked surfaces of some of her swaths of paint are downright ugly and abject, and the bilious colors she draws across the pastoral atmospheres are equally as contradictory. In *Ellipses Near and Far*, another diptych, the canvases are virtual mirror images of each other in terms of color and composition, with the left side almost entirely abstract and the right side more fully developed in terms of recognizable imagery. A lovely, almost vascular, dribble of paint sits mesh-like near the center of the left-hand panel, but placed centrally in the painting and forced to the surface, Wall-Romana has, instead of the more usual floral motifs, poured a dull, gray-green, flat puddle of paint. It sits there almost commanding us to make sense of the trickery of space built through abstraction, because it returns us to the concrete nature of paint as a simple material.

Whenever I come across work that forces aesthetics to the foreground, particularly work that is as accomplished and poised as Margaret Wall-Romana's new group of paintings, *The Spaces*, I am made a little uneasy. It forces me to jettison assumptions and look back at the arguments of the late nineties to see if that line of reasoning still rings true. I suspect the truth is that if the paintings make the viewer querulous, then the line holds. Beautiful artwork that prompts and raises questions about the history, ownership, and potency of aesthetics surely also holds answers to questions of politics and power within its elegant grasp.