

## The Highlights - Cement Garden at Marvelli Gallery

Emily Mae Smith, *Salty European*

*Cement Garden*, the title of the current painting exhibit at Marvelli Gallery, alludes to synthetic replicas and frozen time. These broad associations are given specificity in the work of the four artists shown. Each painter deals with images experienced through the filters of photography and commercial culture. Photo-based compositions, faux naïve style, and allusions to fashion are all utilized to address questions of history and desire in contemporary painting. Thinking and working through our relationships to images is as vital now as it has ever been. A critique to be leveled at much of the work, however, it is that it borrows too heavily on the examples of older artists rather than seeking to articulate itself from a younger perspective.

Margaux Williamson, *The Man Killed His Son*

Emily Mae Smith and Dominic Mañgila each contribute two large works. Both use compositions and painting strategies heavily indebted to photography by way of Marilyn Minter and Gerhard Richter, respectively. Ms. Smith's work references fashion photography with a filmic sense of cropping. Her larger canvas, *Etc.* (a painting that has joined the image stream ahead of itself, appearing in a *New York Times* article about Columbia students before this show) depicts an oversized and prone feminine hand with raucously painted talon-like nails. Its psychological nexus of the passive and aggressive is engaging but overly derivative of the dirty glamour so thoroughly expressed by artists like Marilyn Minter. Her other canvas, a smaller piece titled *Salty European*, is a photo-derived image of the blond crown of what appears to be a child's head. With its 1970s/1870s admixture of browns and blacks and voyeuristic, claustrophobic cropping, it hints at a sensibility that is more unique than the larger work suggests.

Dominic Mañgila, *The Eagle Has Landed*

One of Mr. Mañgila's (a Filipino by birth) works depicts a ghostly helicopter used by Ferdinand Marcos to flee the country after his downfall. Impressively painted in bruised and tattered pinks and reds, it contrasts with *Eruption, 1991*, an unidentifiable field of

compartmentalized horizontal brushstrokes rendered in an icy, muted palette. Its proximity to the photo-derived helicopter suggests a grainy photo or paused film still, the tangible world in mediated flux. In both works there is an overwhelming sense of burnout and lost data, images of images obscured and corroded through repetition.

Margeaux Williamson's four small works span a range of hip subject matter (couples, art galleries, sheep) painted in a Karen Kilimnik-meets-Goth style. In these works, the even sheen of photography is filtered through personal desire and a youthful aesthetic. Her seemingly unlinked array of subjects seems to be a negation of a single author in favor of an un-tethered, Google-jumping relationship to subject. What frustrates the possibility of the work creating a de-centered artistic voice is the visual continuity and unified handling from piece to piece. While this makes for attractive paintings, they ultimately risk (and gain) little in their uniformity of taste.

#### Skyler Brickley, *Venus and Adonis*

Skyler Brickley also included two paintings in the show. While his scenes of troubled and glamorous youth in the wilderness is unsurprising, he benefits most by virtue of contrast with his neighbors. Brickley manages to expand upon the familiarity of his subjects through his use of color and painterly transformations. In two paintings, he reworks the same motif with divergent results. The larger work shows a hallucinatory scene in acidic colors of mythological figures grouped around a fallen Adonis. The other shows a similar scene sans sensuality. Smaller and clunkier, it is painted in monochrome browns over a burlap-like canvas surface. The repetition and shift in scale, color, and materiality embody both the faded luster of a once ecstatic moment, or conversely, the glamorizing nostalgia so frequently used to reinvigorate the moribund. With this doubling, the paintings physically enact themes of cultural exhaustion and reinvention.

While the exhibit unquestionably showcases the work of ambitious and talented artists, the overall effect is underwhelming. The lack of impact is due to too many superficial resemblances in the assembled works and the savvy cautiousness of paintings modeled on successfully established approaches. In many of the pieces, there is a reliance on the work of older painters that undercuts the immediacy of the artists' concerns. At a time so rife with political challenges and technological complexity, it seems fair to expect young artists to engage our image-driven world with questions (and answers) of their own.