

ART REVIEW

Everyday Scenes

Two painters who render the banal in distinct ways

BY DAVID MADDOX

In his essay "The Painter of Modern Life," Charles Baudelaire argued that art must combine eternal and transitory elements. "Nearly all our originality comes from the stamp which the times imprint on our sensations." He pictured the artist as an elevated flâneur, soaking in the sights of the city streets. The artist's role was to serve as a sort of midwife who, by incorporating the forms of contemporary life into art, sets them on a path to becoming the image of antiquity in the future.

Cheyney Thompson invokes this essay in his exhibit at Cheekwood's Temporary Contemporary Gallery. One painting's title, "1854," refers to the year of a drawing by Constantine Guys, the artist who was the basis of Baudelaire's essay. Thompson responds to the admonition to let the contemporary visual environment mark his work, although not in the most obvious ways. When he looks at the streets outside his door, he sees the most mundane things, the things others might overlook, and that's what he paints.

"1854" consists of several canvases depicting bundles of trash. While the material in each little still life is anti-classical, they are nonetheless genre paintings rendered in a classical style, and he has arranged the images to create classical perspective lines by placing the paintings of smaller objects higher and toward the center of the wall.

The title of "Postcards From My Honeymoon" identifies the content of this triptych: large panels show stereotypical scenes from a tropical vacation spot. The paintings have the slick surface and overly bright colors of postcards, but the images are clearly paintings, not photos. While a vacation in such a place is a departure from everyday life, the stock tropical paradise images are as quotidian as cardboard boxes bundled for trash pickup.

"1998" is what remains from a work that was both monumental and self-effacing. In its original form,

Thompson filled all four walls of a room with paintings that showed sections of a raw wood framework in abstract space. Most of the original work has been dispersed, but a section of it is on view at Cheekwood; 10 paintings fill one section of the gallery wall, and the experience is like looking at part of a medieval altarpiece that has been broken up and scattered. In photos of the original installation, the work's floor-to-ceiling hanging brings to mind the way paintings were displayed in the days of royal courts, like the background of Velasquez's "Las Meninas."

The monumental quality is all in the form—most of the canvases depict a few bits of wood that might have held up a complicated structure, sections of latex-coated wire storage bins, or a section of a laminated table, but you cannot extrapolate from

these fragments whether they might have gone together to create a coherent structure. One canvas stands apart with a rendering of a man in a white military uniform, but his face has been marked out.

Thompson uses visual material from everyday contemporary life to play games with the forms of classical painting, and he calls into question the importance of any particular literal image. At the Tennessee Arts Commission, Memphis painter Susan Maakestad also engages the streetscape around her, although in a way that offers more immediate pleasure in the painting itself.

Maakestad's paintings capture post-urban marginal spaces of parking lots, highway overpasses and drainage culverts. These

"CHEYNEY THOMPSON—SELECTED WORKS"

Through March 27 at Cheekwood Museum of Art

"SUSAN MAAKESTAD"

Through April 1 at the Tennessee Arts Commission



The Pleasures of Paint "Sidewalk" by Susan Maakestad, 2004, oil on canvas

starkly functional spaces have only minimal features, stripped and mowed without bushes or trees to interrupt the flatness. She sees these places at quiet times, when they are empty of cars and people, and uses exaggerated colors that suggest the times when light has its most pronounced effects, like sunrise, sunset and before and after storms.

Along with heightening the colors, Maakestad transforms the landscapes. A view of a culvert awash with reds, pinks and greens goes into motion, thanks to the curve of the culvert as it comes out into the foreground, its borders highlighted in red. "Motel Lot" boils down a few parking spaces and sidewalks into a Paul Klee-like geometric series of rectangles where reds and greens resonate against each other. A dark shadow lays over part of the series, creating secondary hierarchies of space and tonalities.

While the paintings are small, tricks of perspective and depiction give them a massiveness. One painting, dominated by blues and grays, at first looks like an aerial view of an expanse of land, but it turns out to focus

on the details of a driveway and a set of unremarkable speed bumps.

These spaces, empty of human activity and possessed of minimal features, have a mournful quality, but the works themselves indulge in the pleasures of paint. Maakestad uses vivid colors, overlaid in complicated ways. She makes the canvas itself present with thin paint that flows into low points of the weave and thicker paint that sticks to the

high points.

These two painters of modern life offer different rewards. Thompson's work is intellectual play, but it involves a kind of visual austerity: what first looks unusual turns out to be banal and recognizable, but then turns out to be practically placeholder content for formal riffs on classical painting. Maakestad is like a magical realist, with a more somber tone and more obvious sensuous appeal, but she's equally fluid in the movement between levels of apprehension, modulating between motion and stasis, intimacy and monumentality, featurelessness and vividness. ■



Intellectual Play Cheyney Thompson, "Study for Festoonery," 2002, oil on organza

ART PREVIEW

ARTISTS' SUMMIT

It makes perfect sense: Herb Williams to sculpt Red Grooms portrait

Of any artist working today in Middle Tennessee, Herb Williams probably has the closest affinity to Red Grooms, the most well-known artist to come from hereabouts. Both share a boundless sense of humor and an eye for telling details about society and personality. Williams' recent sculptures made from crayons seem like the kind of thing Grooms would come up with.

Up to now, the two have circulated in completely separate planes of the art world, but thanks to a series of events enabled by Gordon and Constance Gee, Williams and Grooms are finally meeting. Williams is working on a series of crayon sculptures of iconic Tennessee figures, including Johnny Cash, William Edmondson, Oprah Winfrey—and Red Grooms. While the Gees decided to commission Johnny Cash for their collection, they offered to put Williams in touch with Grooms.

Not surprisingly, Williams was nervous about what Grooms would think of his work, and equally unsurprisingly, Grooms was interested in what Williams is doing. He invited the younger artist to meet him in New York and to sketch and photograph him for the sculpture. That meeting will occur next weekend. Williams and Grooms sit somewhere along the same line of Tennessee artists, and it's satisfying to know that a connection has been drawn between the two of them. —DAVID MADDOX