



Pettest of Pets
Orin Harmon

CLOUGH-HANSON GALLERY / RHODES COLLEGE / MEMPHIS, TN / 2006 MARCH 3-25

Erin Harmon: Pettest of Pets

The paintings collected for Erin Harmon's exhibition, *Pettest of Pets*, are exquisite, magical, captivating, extravagant, and just a little pernicious. Think J Lo's decadent, pink engagement ring somehow crossed with Audrey II, the giant carnivorous plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*. You know you probably shouldn't look, but you want to, you need to. The artist's delicately constructed works lure the viewer in for a thorough examination. Moving in closer, the images unfold, revealing themselves to the viewer as the sweetly complicated conundrums that they are. Once near enough, our eyes widen and we realize that we have been somehow transported to a fantastic space where the artist leads us through a series of dizzying scenarios. These are the liminal, nebulous territories: somewhere between austere and gaudy, with one foot in the night and the other in the day, at the precise moment when felicitous becomes ominous. Ensnared in this extraordinary place, we are left to wrestle with the series of formal and conceptual dichotomies that await us.

We are guided through this trickiest of turfs by the image of the artist. Not to be read as simple, self-portraiture per se, Harmon uses her image to create a character of sorts. Partly truth and partly fiction, this sometimes nude, Uber-Harmon strikes poses that are at once empowered and vulnerable, omnipotent yet flawed, contemporary while timeless. While the paintings present glamorous vignettes, our hero possesses neither the generic, emaciated body of *America's Next Top Model* nor the buxom figure common to super-heroines from the pages of Marvel Comics. Rather, the curvy protagonist is refreshingly commonplace, which allows the viewer to establish a kind of empathy for the vulnerable figure making her way in this potentially hostile environment. Augmented by the paintings' always intense, sometimes abrasive palette, our guide is often so over-the-top and in-your-face girly with her bunny ears, rosy cheeks, dainty wrists, or Shirley-Temple-locks that she takes on a masculine aggression. Existing



Pretty Lies | 15.5" x 15.5" | Oil on wood | 2005

amongst the delicious drips and pours, within the complicated labyrinth of patterns and light, the artist creates as well as inhabits this realm. In this way the images also skillfully create a narrative about what it means to make a painting. Harmon juggles Victorian and Flemish floral patterns along with the always slippery contemporary and historical sexual politics using elaborate, potentially acidic, color combinations. She is at once Janet Jackson-in control, and the Sorcerer's Apprentice—in way over her head.

The paintings' technical language is no less complex than their narrative language. Working on compact, squared surfaces the artist must constantly work to maintain balance within the picture plane. Harmon uses occasional shifts in size of the objects and patterns to upset conventional notions of scale. The finished paintings present shimmering layers of semi-transparent pigments suspended in alkyd medium





Golden Age | 15.5" x 15.5" | Oil on wood | 2005

sometimes alternated with even, opaque layers to build contrast and depth. By painting and pouring the honey-like layers Harmon increases the tension in the paintings further with the potential for a mishap. These under-layers also work to set the stage for the application of the final, buttery, polychromatic layers. As in *If A Hart Do Lack A Hind*, the dozens of poured layers of reds and oranges, create thick, glistening drips along the surface's edges. These resulting drips connect the illusionary world inside the painting to the real world of the viewer.

Aside from the extraordinary formal and technical aspects, there is subdued excitement and adrenaline with a touch of frantic desperation that makes these paintings so compelling. It is the energy that comes when the artist making paintings doesn't have all the answers. It is the energy that comes with seeing these paintings now, in the artist's twenty-ninth year, in the late winter/early spring of 2006. With each finished piece Harmon finds herself and her art in new, uncharted territory, working and growing in an effort to understand this forceful work. Like *Golden Age*, the figure (the artist) is deep within a completely new part of the forest; but way ahead, behind the layers of paint there is a clearing, a place to regroup and recuperate and to decide on the next path.

Hamlett Dobbins
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