

HEROES: DEBORAH OROPALLO, HUNG LIU, AND SQUEAK CARNWATH

TURNER CARROLL GALLERY
725 CANYON ROAD, SANTA FE

The work of three artists who live and work in the San Francisco Bay area is on exhibit at Turner Carroll Gallery under the title *Heroes*. The reflective viewer scratches her head and asks just what is heroic here? Perhaps it is simply that these three women of the same generation (my own) are still making art. Their large canvases breathe deeply in the space of the gallery, each staking its image field as a space of play, inquiry, and contradiction.

The purported thematic of the heroic in art is largely discredited or revisited with great irony. Given how overused a category irony has become, I would speak of distance instead. Critical to all three artists is their particular, unique distance from their material, by which I mean both technique and content.

Hung Liu's work often derives from old photographs she took or bought in China. She uses oil paint mixed with linseed oil to make it "drip," pushing back against her training in China as a muralist and activating the vertical dimension of what is often an implicit historical panorama. Her best paintings find balance between mourning and celebration as they wrestle with the angel of history—her own and that of her native country, which she left three decades ago. The careworn figure holding an infant at the center of Liu's *Refugee Opera* illustrates her chosen distance from subject and genre. The painting alludes to the official Communist style of representing idealized Chinese peasants happily making a new and better world; having experienced the Cultural Revolution as an interruption of her education, Liu portrays ordinary and specific persons, whose

lives have clearly been anything but easy, caught in the machinery of history. In her recent compressed and multi-layered portraits of women there is beauty, but also a seductive glossiness reminding us that advertising and propaganda are siblings. It remains to be seen how Liu, in dialogue with her adopted country, will work through this tension between what is realistic or natural and what is a fantasy projection.

When we say history we think of movements and political climaxes. But today's history is also micro in scale; the circulation and processing of information and images has become a driving force in economics, education, medicine, and much else. Deborah Oropallo develops her visual ideas entirely in digital space, though the final prints are painted upon and otherwise hand-altered. The familiar poses of figures in historical painting are combined with mail-order adult costumes (maids, witches, princesses, superheroes)s often modeled in postures surprisingly similar to the classical paintings. The performative artificiality of Lucas Samaras's Polaroids of the 1970s comes immediately to mind. But a truer predecessor is Richard Hamilton's work of the 1960s and 1970s. Hamilton used photogravure, etching, engraving, dye transfer, burnishing, aquatint, collograph, stencil, and collage—literally every technique then available, to carry out radical interventions in how images spoke. In a catalogue essay for a 1986 Hamilton show at LACMA, Richard Field stressed this aspect of intervention "rather than invention." Though they are in one sense monumental self-inventions, Oropallo's layered images do not return our gaze; they are technical interventions in formal space, built to trigger our own interpretations. The viewer is invited into a circumscribed theatrical space that approximates a niche (the kind for housing religious icons, whether Buddha, Virgin, or Ganesh.) Like the electronic niche currently manifesting as the cell phone screen, where we may act out our individuality with imported images, Oropallo's is charged with constructed idiosyncrasy.

Squeak Carnwath presents us with tabletops of controlled elements, seemingly dispensed with a flick of the wrist (though effortlessness is of course a complex artistic achievement). Everything on her canvases—including transferred images and what appears to be penciled lettering—is rendered in paint mixed with alkyd to give the exact texture she demands. Paint is associated for Carnwath with the body and skin, and indeed the result is a kind of intimacy. She keeps her distance by getting close. In a domesticated space (grocery lists included), words and images are played for scrutiny, the banal placed alongside the lightly skewed arbitrary. In *Sampler* a semi-legible portrait of Dorothy and the Tin Man offers a hint of the heroic journey while undermining such a reading by pointing to the means of production—labels explicitly name various media, techniques, and materials. Carnwath's mental bulletin board of circulating injunctions includes "good ideas are not made they are stolen" and "eat less think better." Jenny Holzer ironized the sententiousness of her pronouncements by puffing them up to Times Square electronic signage scale. Carnwath, passing hers through the technology of paint, understates the power of the thought bubbles of received information to infiltrate our minds. However seemingly casual the arrangement and choice of objects, the artist's viewpoint on this tabletop is the eye of a god, all-seeing and capricious.

Historical panorama, consumer's household bulletin board, or electronic icon niche—we must go with open minds to the artist's turf, asking what it gives us in return.

—MARINA LA PALMA



Deborah Oropallo, *Chambermaid*, acrylic on canvas, 68" x 49", 2012