

Squeak Carnwath

COMMENTS

Squeak Carnwath at David Beitzel - Brief Article

by Jonathan Goodman

Not content with imagery alone, Squeak Carnwath regularly includes text in her compositions; her paintings must be read as well as viewed. Carnwath often reveals a vulnerable psyche, openly worrying about interpersonal relations and society. The writing she incorporates sometimes seems so nakedly sincere that she can distance a viewer more interested in the complex texture of her art—an iconography of Buddhas, penises, flora and fauna, and an offhand linear style which calls to mind the free-flowing hand of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Among Carnwath's concerns in this show were aging and mortality; in *Making Plans* (2000), she writes, "We remember even though our body forgets, doesn't recall getting old." And on the large oil-and-alkyd canvas titled *Obit* (2000), she presents six vertical lists of well-known and not so well-known persons, the age at death painted alongside each name. Curtis Mayfield, the soul singer, died at 57, the revolutionary author George Jackson at 42, comedienne Madeline Kahn at 57. In the case of this painting, no further written commentary from the artist is needed; the stark rows of names and numbers line up like tombstones, investing the casually printed statistics with a gravitas that comes from the recognition of other people's mortality and, by implication, one's own.

A graphically simple painting, *Obit* packs a considerable emotional punch. It is a bit of an anomaly for the artist, however, in a formal sense; Carnwath likes to mix and match styles and words, not so much layering effects over one another as juxtaposing elements side by side. In the 1999 work titled *The Story of Painting*, she offers a quick reprise of the history of art. To the left is a multicolor patchwork composed of red, orange, blue and green squares; open box shapes outlined in black are placed next to a vertical row of different colors in the middle; and at the upper right is a series of colored stripes, beneath which Carnwath has written out two stories about painting.

One narrative, taken from the Roman writer Pliny, recounts the famous story in which two painters competed against each other. One of them painted grapes so real a bird was fooled into pecking at them, while the other painted a curtain so convincingly that the first painter was tricked into trying to pull it away, thinking that the actual work of art was underneath. The second painter was acknowledged the winner because he fooled a human being, as opposed to a bird. This small legend sheds light on Carnwath's view of art, which is both historically and personally aware. She sets the artifice of making paintings against the truth of feeling. In her best paintings, neither side wins; instead, image and feeling complement one another with an awareness of both public and private meaning.

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