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The Masters: Timothy App turns to art history for his latest series of paintings



Timothy App, "Nuptual" 2008

Timothy App Homage Paintings

Through April 17 at Goya Contemporary

By Kate Noonan | 3/18/2009

If you haven't spent much time looking at the work of local artist and MICA faculty member Timothy App, you might look at his latest exhibition, *Homage Paintings*, and think of it as the same old geometric abstraction he has been doing for the better part of his career. But to those deeply familiar with his catalog, App's new series of acrylics on canvas and works on paper feels revolutionary: fresh, inspired, and alive. Looking to art "Old Masters" for guidance, App creates a collection of paintings equally reflective of his own highly developed style as it is influenced by the narrative constructions of his Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassical, and Romantic predecessors. In seeking an artistic and spiritual continuity with the past, App takes on the role of student while employing the technique of a modern-day master.

App's past works of formal geometric abstraction lend an austere elegance: carefully measured in composition, imperceptible in their brushstrokes, and restrained in their color palette. The *Homage Paintings* push App into new artistic territory, though. Rather than severe and deliberate, these studies of old masters portray an air of humble softness, reverent observation, and intimate warmth. This is due in large part to App's striking use of color, seen most vividly in "Nuptual," painted after Northern Renaissance painter Jan Van Eyck's "The Wedding Portrait." Unusual shapes curve, bend, and interrelate in ways previously unseen in App's work, yet traces of himself still linger throughout. The colors are applied in App's ever-meticulous fashion, thinly painted layer upon layer, starting with washes of gray and covered over with additional coats of progressively more intense hues. Then, in the bottom left corner, you see almost as a signature, a gray right triangle, which not only halts the visual movement of the work, but creates a subtle impression of foreground and background, acknowledging not only Van Eyck's adept handling of dimension, but addressing App's interest in the relationship of space to flatness.

In "Nuptial," App's use of color is surprisingly literal: In his own muted way, App represents the green, red, brown, and blue jewel tones of the original oil painting, a bold move for an artist known for color restraint. One of the exhibition's most impressive works, "Meninas," is equally uncharacteristic for App's prominent use of a delicate shade of rose. Largely unrecognizable from its inspiration, Diego Velazquez's "Las Meninas," App's painting once again nods to the original in

his use of color and arrangement. You detect a softening in shape and loosening in App's movement, but by translating the spatial arrangements of the masterworks into his own visual lexicon, he brings his continual exploration of the tenuous relationship between total flatness and depth to dramatic new heights.

Most shocking in *Homage Paintings* is "Concumbere," a tribute to Ingres' Orientalist painting "Odalisque and Slave," where App breaks away from total abstraction and veers perilously close to figurative painting. In fact, even without having any knowledge of the original painting, the central shape is unmistakable as a nude--reduced to its purest elements, yes, but representational nonetheless. Gently sloping, feminine curves interplay with a sweeping, almost gestural half-moon shape of what appears in the original as the partially raised arm of a singing slave. Still present is App's painstaking method of applying thin layers of color, but in "Concumbere" App's voice is clearly precluded by that of Ingres.

While known for his large canvases, App's smaller works on paper bring a more human scale to works that can be somewhat intimidating for their massive size and serious presence. Given the nature of the *Homage* series, wherein App follows in the grand tradition of academic painting, it is quite fitting that the exhibition features several of these studies from as early as 2005. "Study LV" lets you be privy to the process in which these works were conceived, which in this instance feels incredibly personal. As a miniature version of what became the larger canvas, "Tymbos" (after El Greco's "The Burial of Count Orgaz"), "Study LV" reveals how even an established artist continues to learn and mature. You peer into App's own humble act of deference to the greats of history and, this time, App does so by surrendering the logic of geometry to embrace the imaginative storytelling of art history's most highly revered painters.