

Painting has always represented things but when have things ever represented painting? Certainly in the work of Betty Woodman. Objects and the illusion of objects enter into our gaze in a relationship describable as performative. This is only a way of saying that in her work “there is a lot of stuff going on”.

Consider the piece “Room with Green Table”. Ceramic objects are presented on a shelf in front of a painting. They represent a fractured image of a reclining nude. But, amazingly, there are also ceramic elements which represent painting. In the center right part of the painting are attached glazed ceramic pieces which represent a painting of a ceramic pitcher with a handle.

On the left edge of “Room with Green Table” a red column has repeated white forms, some painted, some ceramic. The ceramic pieces are performing a delicious masquerade in which they present themselves as painting.

The little white ceramics on the upper right offer an “echo” of the “painted” vase plus a dagger-like ceramic shape. It seems incongruous until we realize that the painted canvas behind it displays numerous dagger-shaped forms.

Turning to “Museum View” we have again two vases on a projecting shelf. They are assuredly ceramic with the weight, dignity and color of clay. And the four ceramic pieces attached to the wall left of the vases? They may be “ceramic” but truly they are painting. Representing what? They are ceramic “painting” echoing the “real” ceramic vases, with their bulk and projecting shelf to support their weight. This ceramic “painting”, as a painting should be, is hung on the wall. The “vase” shape follows the spatial illusion of the blue wall. Yet the gesture and scale of these forms mimic the actual terra cotta vases. What a happy and promiscuous confounding of painting and sculpture. Echoes of the church Vierzehnheiligen!!

Painting and sculpture are two firmly distinct identities, as are the genders. Woodman’s work is perhaps an example of an aesthetic transsexuality. The material “genders” of sculpture and painting are mixed, dramatized, scoffed at and ultimately worshipped.

In “Museum View” the clay story, the ceramic plot line as it evolves from the center to the left, is balanced by Pure Painting on the right. Here it constructs a Perspectival Plot leading to an ever more complex folding of space. It ends on the right with an impossible but believable architectural origami.

The history of ceramics has yielded a patrimony of forms to Betty Woodman; the vase, its vase belly spout and handle become for her an inexhaustively deconstructed vocabulary. The pitchers gave her the constantly repeated “spout” form. She transformed it to the “Nose”.

Throughout her work we find the nose, turned up, turned down, sniffing or being merely aristocratic.

Oh, what is meant by the noses on the vases on “Green Table”? What shades of attitude do they present? And the left hand vase in “Museum View”, does it have a nose or not? And so Woodman’s work unfolds, hinting at new surprises of representation of things and things that represent. In the end we are left with a purity of vision and high dedication to sight.

-Germane Oregano

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