

Song of a reformed Headhunter

Wednesday, May 16, 2007

"Dark Ride" at Leslie Lohman



Michael Souter's, "Narcissist" work on paper, 60" x 40", mixed media, 2006

What is the difference between erotic art and pornography, I wondered as I wandered in Leslie Lohman gallery, viewing the PRIDE-month art show "Dark Ride: A Nocturnal Journey into the World of Erotic Desire." Part of me wanted to smash any divider between the two, the implicit hierarchy, the false compartmentalization. At the exhibition, I saw many artworks there that must have an erotic charge for the artist, and for those who are attracted to particular physical types—the bear, the androgynous boy, the goth—but have none for me who's not attracted to that type. For me, those artworks failed because they did not show me what was erotic about the figure I would have found unattractive in real life or in porn. They did not do the work of art: to seduce the viewer by its vision and method.

In fact, many of the works on view merely reproduced images, poses and activities familiar in porn. They were shockingly intimate, but they were not personal, in Matisse's sense of the word when he wrote to Roux:

You're interested in nature? Right? Why? Because of this or that. Put it into what you do. And you are already an original artist. That's the trick. But be personal above all, and for that you must be honest.

If you were as good as Holbein, you wouldn't exist yourself, you'd be nothing but his double. It would be better to paint a bit of water, a willow and a fine sky (like Corot) with feeling than to make yet another variation on the most beautiful Leonardo. (Spurling, *The Unknown Matisse*, p. 129)

I did like some pieces there. Michael Souter's "Narcissist" 2006 (mixed media on paper) painted a boy behind a window and filmy, starry curtains, thereby enticing the viewer with the eroticism of half-concealment. In Michael L. Scott's "Football Celebration" 2001 (paint on plywood), joy, uncorked like the champagne, was palpable from the 6 football players composed tightly round a central figure fucked from behind by another player. Jeff Hengst's "Downward Dog" 2005 (oil on board) was one of the few more abstract works in a show dominated by realist figuration. In push-up position, arched into an upside-down V, the body was painted in rich, subtle flesh tones. The background, however, was slapdash white. The contrasts in color and brushstroke were striking.

My friend, Kevin Maxwell, contributed one head portrait to the show. The purple in the background re-appeared in the man's face, creating the impression that he had just emerged, like a dark creature, out of the shadows. His right side was so dark that it appeared like a cavern of an eye-socket. It was a strong picture.

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