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Suburban Scenes, Poetic Paintings and Apocalyptic Art

Jessica Rohrer, Darrell Nettles and Jorge Tacla in this week's Fine Art

By
PETER PLAGENS
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Jorge Tacla: Hidden Identities

Cristin Tierney

540 W. 28th St., (212) 594-0550

Through July 2

The light in the gallery is subdued, of the sort that museums employ when they're showing old photographs that might be damaged by too much illumination. The recent paintings of Jorge Tacla (b. 1958), however, are made of oil paint and cold wax on canvas, so the relative shadow in which they're displayed seems to have something to do with their subject: the dark side of the human condition. As the gallery press materials put it, the paintings depict "a new architecture that arises in the wake of catastrophe."

In two big paintings, each 80 inches square, Mr. Tacla presents a vision of urban ruins in variations of dark blue, using a technique lodged somewhere between the scratchiness of Francis Bacon and the existential smearing of Gerhard Richter's early photo-based paintings. In 20 or so small pictures, each a bit more than a foot on a side, he gives us fragments of the destruction, along with a couple of coy images of a bare-breasted woman that appear to be derived from old pinups.

The two large paintings—by far the best in the show—are visually foolproof; the monochrome images, along with the even distribution of small, fuzzy shapes, preclude the risk of any real pictorial mistakes. Given this aesthetic buffer, the pictures' subject matter is less powerful than it might otherwise be.

Jessica Rohrer: Bloomfield

P.P.O.W.

535 W. 22nd St., (212) 647-1044

Through June 27

Jessica Rohrer (b. 1974), who was educated at Northwestern University and Yale, might be called a painter of domestic life, save that there are no people in her paintings. Ms. Rohrer concentrates instead on the artifacts of American middle-classness: automobiles, consumer products and—since she has settled in the pleasant suburb of Bloomfield, N.J.—architecture. She paints small (11 by 15 inches is somewhat standard) oil-on-panel street scenes (well-kept houses under leafy trees) of her current hometown. (Ms. Rohrer formerly lived in Wisconsin and Brooklyn.)

Her style is hardly unique, since the comforts of working from photographs (as Ms. Rohrer does some of the time) on small formats appeals to hundreds of artists. But Ms. Rohrer is very, very good at it, and not just technically: She composes with derring-do, plays with perspective in a way that gives her work an earnestness remindful of early Flemish painting, and vacuums her neighborhood—not a speck of trash lies anywhere. Ms. Rohrer's Bloomfield could contend with Stepford itself for a civic-association award.

The exhibition is, however, too big (23 paintings and 18 works on paper), and within it the close-ups of small commercial objects on which the lettering is imperfectly fussed over are jarring in the presence of the longer—and better—views of houses and yards. Whether Ms. Rohrer's take on her community is ironically critical and she sees it as stultifyingly conformist, or quietly adoring of life lived in nicely tended homes and shiny, near-new foreign cars, is up for grabs. That ambivalence, though, drives us back to the look of the paintings themselves, which is a treat.

Darrell Nettles: Broken Verse

Thomas Jaeckel

532 W. 25th St., (917) 701-3338

Through July 3

Darrell Nettles's paintings, gallery press materials say, "are ergodic in the deepest and most satisfying sense of the word." Ergodic is a math/physics term indicating a system that operates over both time and space. Applied to the handsome, elegantly ordered letter-and-word pictures of Mr. Nettles (b. 1948), it seems to mean that the viewer is intended to appreciate them both spatially as paintings and sequentially, as texts to be read.

In terms of the former, the artist does a fine—actually, a refined—job. "When You Look at Me" (2014), at 82 by 60 inches one of the two big paintings in the show, is as dignified as a diplomat's three-piece suit. Two smaller near-abstractions with partial letter shapes incised in thick white or black paint are more vigorously arresting.

The exhibition slumps a little in the midsize panels (about 3 feet high by 2 feet across) with sprayed-and-masked-off whole words. In them, the painting quotient is less, the poetry part greater. The poetry is conventionally abstruse, but not much more than that.

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