

It's Alive!

Art of the Living Dead

by Doug Harvey

Painting's been declared dead and resuscitated so many times, it's lately started showing signs of brain damage. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing, especially considering the cramped, pedantic crap that's foisted off by self-declared "intellectual" painters (shtick-crippled Christopher Wool, for example). UCLA Hammer's "The Undiscovered Country" — the latest installment in this zombie serial — offers up a mixed bag of contemporary figurative and landscape paintings as denizens of a sort of purgatory. The title comes from *Hamlet*, and as an essay on guilt, incest, delusion and equivocation in the art world, the exhibit is a resounding success. Taken at face value, it fares less well.



The basic premise seems to be that the ongoing crisis of representational painting practice brought on by the twin historical threats of photography and pure abstraction has spawned an army of resurrection artists, hauling painting's moldering corpse from the grave and parading it around like a ghoulish marionette, acting out ghastly caricatures of its familiar life routines without any sense of their meaning. All well and good so far; anyone painting for the last century has had to deal with the medium's drastically diminished capacity — at least in the gallery if not the studio.

Where I get lost is, Why these particular paintings and not others? Some, like SoCal conceptualist guru John Baldessari's "A Painting by . . ." series (farmed out to various county-fair artists) address these issues head-on. Others, like Richard Hamilton's three disparate pieces, are rooted in a lifelong exploration of the contingencies of the modern visual landscape (Hamilton was, after all, the British father of Pop Art — though it rather quickly flipped him off and set sail for America). But many of the artists seem to have been included arbitrarily, or due to the mere fact that they chose to paint representationally at a time when it was unfashionable. Don't get me wrong — it's always a joy to see the oils of onetime Angelenos Vija Celmins and Philip Guston, and the little-known work of the late East Coast picture maker Fairfield Porter translates the soft focus and deliciously lurid pallet of the Fauves into a peculiarly restrained and distinctly American academic vernacular. I just don't buy them as hungry ghosts lost in some postmodern bardo.

Which wouldn't be a problem if so much of the other work — the new stuff — weren't (as the beatnik parlance for malnourishment would have it) strictly *from hunger*. L.A.'s own Laura Owens' sole contribution (a cantering horse copied from somewhere or other) and local Owens clone Mari Eastman's slapdash glitter paintings continue their tried and false post-feminist assertion that it's enough to just be cute. Twenty-something Scotsperson Lucy McKenzie's workmanlike graphic-designy "Brain" paintings are a little funny, but her smaller *They Are Lying On Their CVs* is just clumsy and embarrassing. Local German import Thomas Eggerer's indifferent pictorials and classmate Lukas Duwenhögger's cryptic social scenes possess a high shrug factor. It was a tremendous mistake to hang late German Jochen Klein's lame-ass collage paintings in the same room with Richard Hamilton's early '70s *Soft Pink Landscape*. Not only does it point up their utter lack of originality but brazenly emphasizes Klein's relative incompetence.

On the other hand, I came away feeling a little better about the work of Peter Doig, a Trinidadian by way of Edinburgh (a number of the painters included, as well as curator Russell Ferguson, hail from the land of John Knox); his gnarly hooded *Figure in Mountain Landscape* gets extra points for citing a Captain Beefheart song. Alabammer-turned-Angeleno Edgar Bryan's *The Ledge* does a remarkable job

dismantling and reassembling the picture plane, all in the guise of a portrait of the artist as a young man. Swedish painter Mamma Anderson's modest panels are richly detailed, expertly treading the fine lines between abstraction and representation and between intentionality and randomness in the painting process. Angeleno-gone-Limey L.A.-born Londoner Kirsten Everberg's nauseating (in the very best way) enamel paintings of hotel interiors and New York Puerto Rican Enoc Perez's dry, eviscerated oilstick portraits of hotel exteriors transmute the banality of their subject matter with compelling formal approaches. Eighties Manhattan stalwart Richard Prince's recent painted-over inkjet blowups of vintage nurse paperbacks are among his best work, although L.A. artist Steve Hurd did the same thing better with his *über*-drippy renderings of *Woman's Day* magazine covers 10 years ago.

Which brings me back to the big question again. Why isn't Hurd in this show? Or Tyler Stallings, whose remarkable photorealistic oil paintings are currently on view at Newspace gallery? Why not Roger Herman's application of painterly expressionism to arbitrarily chosen photographic subject matter? Or Brad Spence, whose airbrushed appropriations of porno-movie stills, *Psychology Today* illustrations and photos of shrimp cocktails are some of the most interesting contemporary L.A. paintings, and a far more coherent illustration of Ferguson's thesis? Without trying, I can name a dozen young (and local) artists whose work better fits the criteria outlined in curator Russell Ferguson's catalog essay, and also stands up formally to the high standards set by artists like Celmins, Baldessari, or Hamilton. Maybe it's just that they don't have a foot in the door of the international art-world jet set. Or maybe the fact that they don't see themselves as beating a dead horse (O' Paint?) renders them invisible to the curatorial gaze.

Much of the problem is set out in Ferguson's catalog. His essay is one of the best pieces of writing on the problems facing painters today, and I would highly recommend it to any young artist contemplating taking up the brush. Nevertheless, it is convincing only up to the point where he begins trying to rationalize his inclusions of the young, lousy variety. His use of the term "skilled" in reference to Owens and Klein makes him sound like he's auditioning to write speeches about Iraq for the president. I've managed to avoid teaching any classes in art criticism so far, but here's a rule of thumb I've been saving up in case such a grim fate should befall me: If you can substitute any randomly chosen equivalent artwork into a piece of art criticism and it makes the same amount of sense, it's essentially meaningless.

To his credit, Ferguson prefaces his essay with a disclaimer: that much of the work in the show is attempting to circumvent the role verbal language plays in the painting's contextualization, and therefore his writing about the work is inherently at odds with his central curatorial impulse. Unfortunately, this insight isn't taken far enough. There are thousands and thousands of artists whose work is created in a visual dialogue with their peers, with art history, and with the total visual environment. And without reference to or support from words. Most of the work in "The Undiscovered Country" is engaging the history of the discussion around painting. By limiting the roster in this way, Ferguson actually winds up reinforcing the notion that artmaking merely illustrates prescribed, verbally articulated art theories — and ultimately reabsorbing the fundamental nonverbal objection into the discourse about art. It would be a lot more depressing if it were true, or even convincing. Happily it is neither, and Ferguson's ghost world signals the death throes not of painting but of art theory. We may well have talked ourselves into a corner, but we can still paint our way out. Or as *Hamlet's* mom Gertrude snaps at the chatterbox Polonius when he has a bit of trouble getting to the point, "More matter — with less art!"

The Undiscovered Country | UCLA Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood | Through January 16