

Vanishing Pt.

Cynthia Broan Gallery through May 1

BY MICHAEL RUSH

FOR CENTURIES, IN THE writings of mystics and philosophers, a battle (albeit a tea-pot kind of battle) brewed around the relative merits and deficiencies of action vs. contemplation. To the mystically inclined, the contemplative life, cloistered behind monastery walls, was the path to union with the Almighty, while, for the more socially minded, action, or working on behalf of the poor, was the most God-like way to conduct one's life. The philosopher Ortega y Gasset applied the terms of this medieval argument to his study of the arts, suggesting that paintings, particularly landscapes, were meant to foster contemplation, but novels required action, or plot, to keep a reader interested. I was reminded of this seeming antagonism between action and contemplation after walking slowly through the largely contemplative atmosphere created by painter and curator Margaret Evangeline in her group exhibition, *Vanishing Pt.*

Despite the evidence of techniques inherited from action painting in some of the work here, the overall impression is one of marked serenity achieved by artists for whom the gesture of painting or sculpting is in no way violent. The philosopher might have called it "ecstatic stillness," for that is the cumulative effect of this most satisfying effort: quiet work whose intensity keeps revealing itself the longer one looks.

Judging by the amount of erasures, overlays of paint, out of focus words and the like on view, Evangeline, in her exhibition's title, is not

referring to the technique made famous by Vermeer of creating perspective on the canvas by a series of precise mathematical calculations emanating from "the vanishing point," or point of focus. She is more concerned with actual "vanishings" in progress, or with moments that intercept an approaching disappearance, stopping it for an instant, long enough to leave a trace of what had been.

A few artists here achieve this through light, either literally, with light fixtures, or accidentally, through the interaction of light and unusual materials. Sharon Loudon attaches cotton dental rolls dipped in luminous paint to wires that she then inserts into the ceiling. This upended, gnarly bush, ensconced in a narrow room, is paradoxically illuminated (thanks to the paint) in pale fluorescent green when a light focused on it goes off at certain intervals. Curator Evangeline's own *THE UTERINE FURY OF MARIE ANTOINETTE #1*, 1999 is a large, abstract landscape painted on two connected aluminum panels. Rich with greens, dark and dripping, the work appears three-dimensional as the aluminum reflects natural light that shifts and quivers according to the viewer's moving gaze. Apparitions appear, then dissolve into the pigment. Evangeline's two other works here, both twelve-inch squares, are awash with beeswax on aluminum. Rubber-stamped phrases (such as "fragrant with light") are barely visible through the milky wax, suggesting fragments from a diary.

Fran Siegel shares Evangeline's affection for the ethereal in her *AIRBOX 01*, 1998. Biomorph shapes appear to float inside a scrim-covered box. Burns in the fabric suggest simultaneously the birth and death of our genetic ancestors. Two other delicate works, both *UNTITLED*, 1998 are fashioned from thread on vellum.

In one, the shapes Siegel makes with her needle suggest renderings of small stone portals found in ancient Roman cities.

ODILI DONALD ODITA offers two contrasting works placed nearby in the back of the gallery. *THE VANISHING*, 1999 is a textured black circle painted directly on the wall like a target. This sturdy, black shape will, indeed, be erased by white paint when the exhibition ends. His *TROPICALIA*, 1999 is a densely colored geometric canvas in which points vanish behind the surface, evoking the infinity inherent in many mathematical equations.

Jacqueline Humphries applies enamel to black paper in a gestural style that seems to emanate from a single burst of energy. Lines twist and curl without evidence of pausing. The deliberately placed crosses on one of the works (each is titled *UNTITLED*, 1999) become landmarks on the map of an unknown, sunless world.

Standing apart, chosen perhaps for their surface distance from the other work, are Richmond Burton and Jene Highstein. Burton's *REFRACTED SPACE*, 1997 is a manic explosion of all-over color and forms that appear to have shattered any semblance of a grid that may have existed when the painting began. Jene Highstein's *ORACLE*, the single sculpture included, is oddly rounded with a gaping hole in its center. This dense ash figure is making a sorry prediction to those who listen.

Curiously enough, in the paintings of Vermeer, say, or his contemporary Pieter de Hooch, the vanishing point endures on the canvas as a wondrous optical trick that allows for depth on a flat surface. In this exquisitely curated exhibition, the gestures so evident in the making of the works are long gone, leaving us no vanishing point to return to, but granting us the more lasting pleasure of contemplation in world so mired in distracting actions.