

BORDERLINES: NON-RATIONAL NARRATIVES

AXLE CONTEMPORARY

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Punched-up, free-verse poetry dominates thematically in about thirty works of art by four artists: Zoe Blackwell, whose endearingly compulsive watercolors on paper are perhaps the surprise standout of the exhibition; the embroiderer Thelma Mathias, who comes closest of the four to actual storytelling, with more than a hint of an absurd yet touching vulnerability; Gerry Snyder, the well-known painter, whose richly hued contemporary interpretations of Titian and Tiepolo are rife with humor and Old Testament lyricism; and Jerry Wellman, a man of words and worlds, whose brilliant watercolors scat, jazz-like, with scrawled text against fantastic settings. In considering the four together, some may prefer a pairing of Blackwell with Snyder for a sleeker presentation within the limited confines of Axle, the van-turned-traveling-gallery. (See their web site for locations and hours, as well as for a history of the van itself.) The two artists have a commonality of relative restraint, although none of their works would suggest anything like moderation. Self-discipline is evident—absolutely, if self-discipline can presume the decadence of thorough abandonment to obsession. Mathias and Wellman provide both the funk and punk, respectively, that lend the show its current proletarian ambiance, which somehow seems more in keeping with presenting art in a converted 1970s stepvan. It's good art, and the van itself an object to be admired; curating inside of it must be frustrating and delightful.

All of the artists except Snyder use actual text in their work, yet his is the most cogent in terms of expressing linear narrative. That is neither good nor bad, and besides, the whole point of *Non-Rational Narratives* is that the art's content need not move from point A to B to C and onward in a linear fashion. Snyder makes art that addresses the Bible-thumping Christianity that would have Adam and Eve on Earth a mere eight thousand years ago, for example, and because our cultural familiarity with such lore provides the religious backdrops for his floating, Play-Doh-like figures, we tell the stories when we look at the pictures. *Rapture Complete*, an installation of thirty-seven gouaches of individual painted-paper figures, is an opulent, many-layered tale of a current event that didn't happen on May 21, much to the bewilderment of preacher Harold Camping and his apocalypse-minded followers. Each of Snyder's ascending figures is fastened to the wall, ripe in its own color and asexual innocence, seeming to dematerialize before us.

Blackwell, like Snyder in a full-blown manic phase, presents her viewers with a subject she's fixated upon with pen, pencil and watercolor, and allows that subject to glide and bump about in the atmosphere somewhere between our minds and hearts. Her *Vanitas* is a deconstructed seventeenth-century Dutch memento mori, a flower painting—complete with insects—that floats in and out of consciousness, where awareness of our own mortality lurks in grand Baroque tenebrism. How Blackwell can so lovingly

yet neurotically inhabit her work and then let it go is a mystery of generosity. *Temper* is a simple piece in which the word is written in tiny, barely legible squiggles and repeated thousands of times in different colors. Simple enough, yet a second viewing of it reveals the cost of clamping down on biting emotions. "Temper, temper!" we advise ourselves through gritted teeth. Blackwell's control is somehow invigorating—not a concept we usually associate with OCD.

Mathias uses embroidery to stitch her tales of woeful hilarity. In one, *Parachute*, she bemoans not getting a Heinz pickle pin—like all the other kids—when her dad took her to the 1939 World's Fair. Who among us doesn't still harbor an inordinately deep resentment and/or sorrow about some perceived act of treason by an adult against us during our childhood? *Makin It Purdy* is a terrific little yarn about a cowboy—his horse tied between two cars—trying to impress the artist while she sews away on a café patio.

Wellman's works function like amulets against too much linearity; in *Candle Flyer*, a light-bearing figure—a guardian of the dream world—flies against a starry sky. The artist uses his paper pieces to point us toward that place where "rational things start to slip away," as he says, effectively employing saturated color and a loose, open compositional form to allow the viewer to access a fuller understanding of whatever they may choose to investigate from within the myriad levels of our collective subconscious.

—KATHRYN M DAVIS



Zoe Blackwell, *Vanitas* (detail), graphite and watercolor, 19" x 22", 2011