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THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

Amy Pleasant, Art With Economy of Silence

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Art with economy of silence -- Pleasant's 'You Are Here' tells stories in mind of the beholder

Amy Pleasant: 'You Are Here': At Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College, through Oct. 11, 2006.

When you go see Amy Pleasant's exhibition "You Are Here" at Clough-Hanson Gallery block out a chunk of time, say, an hour, or the rest of your life. Her swirls of tiny human figures (and a few animals), drawn with ink on paper, and two sequences drawn directly on the walls, require very close and prolonged looking. The works are intricate narratives, partaking both of comic books and the cinema, but the stories they tell are oblique and implied, sometimes repeated or doubled back on themselves. Doubled, also, is the meaning of the exhibition title. "You are here" is the universally recognized indicator, a little arrow or star, that shows where a person is on a map of a shopping center or mall or a section of a town or, in puzzles and mazes, establishing a position or beginning, an aid we might need in looking at Pleasant's intricate drawings.

"You are here" may also be taken in the sense that within the spiraling, formless borders of her narratives, we, the viewers, are here; these are our stories.

Since each of the eight pieces in the exhibition is untitled, Pleasant offers no hints about ideas or themes, though the general tone of the work is of uncertainty, missed connections, the sorrows of the past and present, the temporary gratification of the quotidian. Trying to follow the line of a "story" along its twisting path is made more challenging because Pleasant seems occasionally to elide time and space, or to depict an incident or encounter from a different vantage.

These difficulties are easy to bear, however, considering the endlessly inventive imagination that lies behind these works and the tremendous drawing ability that created them. Pleasant is a virtuoso of ink. See how she uses three or four dots to suggest a figure off in the distance and then adds a dot or two, makes the dots slightly bigger and before you know it, there's a little person in front of you. In the large drawing to the left of the gallery's door, in a brief sequence, there's a cat rendered with perhaps eight strokes of ink, a Zen-like masterpiece of economy and expression.

Pleasant uses oval ink washes of various tones of whites and grays and blacks to isolate and emphasize a figure or space, sometimes conjuring worlds with that shape - a street corner, a bed, a house in a flat landscape. Sometimes she uses a dark wash to define a face or figure rather than making the figure with lines. Men and women meet and embrace; a good deal of romance and sex goes on in these pieces, balanced by what also seems to be a good deal of loneliness, depression, crisis and death.

These hypnotic feats of miniaturization are accomplished with a technique that combines utter control of the medium with the freedom of spontaneity, yet each figure, however tiny, is so unerringly convincing that we never concentrate on technique at the expense of the feeling or personality Pleasant so fleetly depicts.

Ultimately, the impression one carries away from the exhibition is not so much the teeming populations of figures that animate the pieces, though these are impressive, but the muteness with which all this activity takes place. The houses, buildings and cities, the fields and landscapes; the people who scurry back and forth, seeking identification, authenticity and connection; the desire, love and diminishment; the constant round of chores and actions; all occur under a weight of oppressive silence.

In one piece, a woman fashioned from a pair of ink blobs opens her mouth wide and utters - a cry? a shout? a song? an assertion? a protest?

There's no way to know. The silence speaks even more loudly than she can, and yet she is frozen in that utterance for as long as the work of art survives.

Fredric Koepfel