

ART IN REVIEW

'Painting as Paradox'

Artists Space
38 Greene Street
SoHo
Through Dec. 21

If someone wanted to prove that painting had become trivial, "Painting as Paradox" would be handy evidence. Painting was once an arena in which to explore human experience from the celestial to the abysmal; to judge by this crowded exhibition of more than 60 mostly younger or emerging artists, it has shrunk to an endeavor of clever and cautious professionalism.

That is not the whole story of painting today. Nevertheless, this show's organizer, Lauri Firstenberg, has located a realm of academic mediocrity where many painters live, a place hemmed in by preoccupation with materials, techniques, digital design and semiotics. In this sense, the show may not be inspiring, but it is informative.

Many individual cases are compelling: the hyperrealistic, hand-painted portraits of Karel Funk; the intricately patterned psychedelic abstractions made by Claire Corey using computer software; Kieran Kinney's glowing, neatly made painting of a tropical city; Benjamin Edward's schematic, Piranesian vision of suburban architecture.

But where solo shows by these and others might look distinctively individualistic, the salon-style cramming together of so many works by so many different artists has a leveling effect. Everybody looks a little eccentric, but all bump up against the same ceiling of sophisticated, low-risk ambition. So it is something of a relief to behold David Nicholson's "Garden of Love," a willfully provocative blend of old-master-style figurative painting and soft pornography. It's not a good painting, but neither is it so inoffensively well mannered as most of the rest of the exhibition.

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