

ALEXANDRE



Describing Profundity in Art

BIGBEE ASTOUNDS

BY MARIO NAVES

What did Brett Bigbee think of a recent headline announcing “Painting is Back” and its accompanying article, in which his current show at Alexandre Gallery was featured?

Given how deeply Bigbee is immersed in the verities of 15th-century Netherlandish painting and early American folk art, he’s likely to have shrugged it off, wondering just where it is painting might be returning from. This is, after all, an artist for whom Hans Memling isn’t a dusty historical figure but a contemporary—and the competition. The

notion that the art form could be anywhere but here and now is antithetical to a temperament that favors the long reach over the quick fix.

Bigbee is a paint handler and draftsman of infinite patience and consummate skill; his paintings often take years to complete. Working from observation, he transforms an intimate scope of reference—family, food-stuffs and the natural world—into mesmerizing displays of technical virtuosity. Bigbee coaxes ghostly, surreptitiously stylized portraits from dense fields of graphite. With oil

paint he brings greater tangibility to form, rendering each object in his purview with crystalline attention.

Pegging Bigbee as a realist is simultaneously accurate and a misnomer. Meticulous craftsmanship does more than limn appearances. Fidelity to verisimilitude generates otherworldly, if not quite surrealist, portent. Bigbee endows people, objects and places with unnatural clarity and quietude. When a picture concerns itself with a girl on the verge of pubescence—as in “Abby” (2005–2010), a portrait of heart-stopping austerity—time is rendered both immovable and forever tenuous. There’s never been a painting quite like it.

Bigbee comes close to achieving something similar in “Joe and James” (2002–2003), a painting that suffers—not fatally, mind you, but enough that it nags—from theatricality; artifice, though understated, undercuts the dour antagonism of the boys named in the title. He falls altogether short with “Portrait of Ann” (2004–2008), if only because art historical precedent—in this case, Leonardo’s *sfumato*—is made blatant. Bigbee is at his best when he doesn’t tip his hand.

But these are the gaffes of an artist who more than earns our respect and, yes, amazement. Painting may not be eternal, but its scope is greater than any headline can encompass. Bigbee proves it each time he puts brush to canvas.

Brett Bigbee: Recent Work

Through Dec. 17, Alexandre Gallery, 41 E. 57th St., 212-755-2828, www.alexandregallery.com.

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