

COSTUME THEATER

Bettina Sellmann at Derek Eller

By Sarah K. Jorgensen

Bettina Sellmann's recent paintings in watercolor on canvas conjure a stunning and enigmatic world of costume, courtly manners and fine finishes defined by colorful washes and sensitively rendered drawings. On another level, Sellmann's work hints at the conflicts in the rise of the individual, both historically and metaphorically, today.

Originally from Munich, Sellmann studied art at the Beaux Ecole in Paris and the Sandburg institute in Amsterdam. The artist has been working in New York since 1999, having received her MFA at Hunter College in 2002. The work on display at Derek Eller through November 15 marks a departure from her past, pop-inspired pictures. As finely finished and striking as past images, her new drawings tread into philosophy and personal disquiet.

Her whimsical lines invite, her washes expose. Her carefully crafted yet loose line sets her work apart from other figurative painting or works on paper. Her work doesn't show an over attention to detail. Yet detail is present. The essence of figures and their world is communicated, the decorative elements still intact.

Sellmann's paintings have the bright colors and layers of the late watercolors of Emil Nolde, yet her subjects are defined by the contrast of restriction of line and freedom of wash. She allows the colors to spread across the paper, but doesn't mix her hue. Instead she plays with saturation of color. Like other artists working today, Lisa Yuskavage or John Currin, she is both attracted to the sensuousness of figurative painting and engaged in a conversation with European master paintings. Unlike other artists, her paintings go into the surface--through technique and subject matter--to reveal a deeply personal, strangely beautiful anxiety.

Through layers of transparent washes, the artist has created translucent allusions to Old Master paintings. In both her paintings and drawings, elaborately costumed figures are formally posed in isolating environments of color and shadow. The restricted mobility of the postures and clothing follows a courtly etiquette and refers to classical Baroque portraiture. The younger sitters fuss, not having yet adjusted to their poses or corsets. Older figures, however, have conformed to the rigid formality required by their costumes, indicating an acceptance of social position and the attitude that goes along with it. However their faces occasionally belie their discomfort and unease. At times the body of the subject, a breast, an underarm, or a thigh is exposed through the washy layers of fabric that supposedly cover them--naked, not nude. The characters in the paintings do not disrobe, they are visible within, not behind or without, their clothes. The beauty of the

figures and their carefully constructed world are shadowed by unease.

Referring to the Baroque period is not simply an aesthetic choice. Sellmann sees it specifically as the beginning of modern times - the period in Western Europe when the philosophical writings of Lock, Hume, Newton and Voltaire extolled the cultivation of the human mind, and stressed individual skepticism and experience over superstition. At the same time, highly structured and complicated social rituals, an interest in perfected appearance and a strict formulaic mode of communication marked this period.

Using subject matter and formal technique, Bettina Sellmann investigates the experience of social roles and external appearances. In a metaphoric way, the paintings point at the general struggle to fit into demanding roles placed upon us from within and without. The conflict arises when we consider both the binding nature and necessity of these roles. The arbitrariness of these roles as mere “shells” may be revealed, but they remain necessary because we must inhabit them in order to engage in this world.

The works on display at Derek Eller, 526-30 West 25th Street, from the 15 of October through the 15 of November dare to pose certain questions, including what are the confines of social posturing, and how necessary are they? The resolution of these questions is found in both formal technique and theoretical idea: the subjects are exposed through light layers of paint or softened shading of charcoal. Although the translucent washes challenge the solidity of the costumes and armor, we must look into, not beyond, the surface to see what inhabits it.

Bettina Sellmann gives us her answer in the act of painting and the freedom we find in life if we recognize the shells for what they are: unbinding facades. “The moment of FREEDOM”, however, “is the moment when you choose where to put the brush. The infinite possibility that reminds you that in life you are truly free to do what you want.”