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Robert Olsen: Caution

Robert Olsen's show at Plane Space consists of 12 oil on panel paintings, approximately 1:1:41 each. However much the images fit Olsen's photo realistic, noir oeuvre, they do not represent a consistent visual story. Understanding the changing nature of Olsen's approach apparent in the show poses a challenge. His current work is both problematic and exciting is that it hints at a period of transition in both treatment of subject matter and style. By incorporating a looser brush method and playing with different subject matter, he is challenging his own painterly system- while not being overt.

Over the past few years, Robert Olsen has painted urban nocturnal scenes: traffic lights, bus stops, gas stations, and car parts. Concise, with details to a minimum, the paintings are smooth, stylized and solitary, an American sublime recognizable in Ed Ruscha. At times, Olsen's work somehow transcends that. Nevertheless, the looseness of his brushwork and diversity of subject matter presents somewhat of a conundrum. By keeping to his pallet of various shades of sepia and Prussian blue, we are offered somewhat of a system. But his subjects are varied enough that to pull them together into one visual story is delusive. Comparing this show and application of brush with Olsen's work of the past is both confusing and refreshing. This paradox indicates the artist attempting to buck his own style, while not overtly changing it.

He continues to depict subjects in nocturnal isolation: a woman in tanning booth (Untitled (tan booth), 2005), a light in a hotel room (Untitled (Hotel), 2005), an edge of a swimming pool (Untitled (Pool), 2005), an illuminated sign (Untitled (Open Sign), 2005), a body tied up in a car trunk (Untitled (Trunk), 2005), the gutted side of a truck bed (Untitled (Truck), 2005) That someone has turned on the hotel light, laid down on the tanning bed, or clamped the car provides the viewer with evidence of human action. But the paintings notably do not contain a humanness--the tanner's head is not depicted, the person parked his car in an undesignated spot and deserted it, the art opening where the bottles came from finished long ago, the sign for the store blinks open even though no one is there. Although evening isn't necessarily the moment of all the paintings, there is an overall sense that Robert Olsen is picking up on pieces of the night marking the remains of the day's activity.

Olsen's interest in systems fuels his collecting of isolated subjects. Olsen himself is interested in partial models. Akin to sampling, partial modeling is a way to look at a system that just takes a part of it, so you can look at it in its entirety. Partial modeling recognizes how very complex things are and takes parts of it to understand the larger whole. But in terms of totality, there is no one-to-one relationship to any of this. Perhaps it is a way of arriving at something, such as why he paints at night.

Making his paintings in a similar format creates the illusion of a system, however

there is a paradox in this exhibition of his paintings. They are not all of a same subject matter, whereas in the past he has painted isolated objects from the same scene such as a street corner. Setting his paintings in quasi-neutral spaces and painting in noir tones provides a connection between otherwise disparate objects. According to Olsen, what the night provides is a way of making something naturalistic without talking about what environment it is in.

The color and composition of his paintings hold intensity somehow larger than their unusual size (most are 1:1.41, or the square root of 2). Working with a limited palette of Prussian blue, sepia, zinc white, and traces of red and yellow, Olsen builds upon a dark ground, adding layers of paint toward light. The smoothing of these layers into seamlessness creates the vibrancy in his finishes. This time, however, these paintings do not exhibit the sharp metallic-like finish of his last batch that showed at Plane Space.

While still keeping the detail to minimum so that “what is important” remains, visible brushwork--which he once kept to a minimum--is apparent in each of his paintings. His stated emphasis on accurately depicting subjects raises the question why he should shift away from painterly perfection--something for which he has such a natural talent. It would seem logical to assume that spending 80 hours on a small painting would provide enough impetus to change his approach, but there is something that attends to a larger purpose in his change of technique: he wants them to be slightly looser. And certainly, as Olsen points out, some things just look better loose. Some objects need to have apparent transitions--you can't paint gravel tightly.

Many of the paintings at Plane Space show both types of brushwork: The bottles in (Untitled (Bottles), 2005) blend naturally, but what would not appear naturally are the bold dashes of white across the plastic bag. Though laborious, it is easy for him to make everything appear whole but he is grappling with where to draw the line. He does not want the viewer to be too distracted by the paint marks but still wants some to be visible.

Looking around the room you see other ways the artist is challenging himself. Different ideas occur in the same format. (Untitled (Open), 2005) references semiotics. Two identical mannequin paintings placed side-by-side pay homage Rauschenberg's identical paintings. The painting of the bottles conjures interesting ideas about beauty, refuse and renewal. This diversity: the delusory appearance of a single story line or visual style is symptomatic of an artist in transition and it is what makes the work interesting. Perhaps it is the most exciting time to explore the work of an artist, because it is when they are vulnerable.

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102 Charles Street