

Arts Club of Washington
November 2014 Exhibition

Remarks

November 7, 2014

Erich Keel

Judith Nordin, thank you for your kind words.

I also want to thank Nichola Hays, gallery manager of the Arts Club, for her expert help in hanging the paintings and photographs. The Arts Club provides a space that resonates with history; it is also a space that needs somebody with the skills and sensitivity of Nichola. Again, thank you, Nichola.

Let me begin with this gallery, known as the Monroe Gallery. We are looking at canvases by Leslie Nolan--gestural, painterly, textured, qualities enhanced by bright colors and daring compositional strategies. In art-historical terms, Nolan's work is Neo-Expressionist. Most of us are aware that artists don't like to be categorized, nailed down to a certain school or movement. They strive to be original; and it is true art schools and critics encourage them to develop a personal style, their own point of view. At the same time, artists--and critics we should add--tend to work out of a tradition, and what is relevant here is to examine how an artist strives to master this tradition all the while he or she deviates from it.

There are a number of aesthetic decisions that impart Leslie's work a strong Neo-Expressionist quality: I am thinking here in particular of how she approaches the subject of the figure, the face and the human body. Shown on a vigorously painted abstract ground, the figure is for Leslie many things--proud, haughty, self-absorbed, introverted, handsome, athletic, or frail. There may be other qualities that her male figures here embody. What we **can** agree on is the sophisticated rhetoric with which Leslie paints her subject--figures are shown either frontally, that is, full-face, or in three quarter profile. Leslie presents them so that we see them obliquely, or from above, or from below. Often heads are cropped--a device that tends to add emphasis and drama, at the same time making us more aware of her compositional choices.

Brilliantly, I believe, Leslie Nolan has made the Neo-Expressionist language her own. If Georg Baselitz entered this gallery, he would feel at home right away, except that he would want to hang her canvases upside down. And of course we do not want him to do that.

Let's turn to the work by Jane Godfrey on display in the Monroe Parlors next door. Her art presents an instructive contrast with Leslie's, and demonstrates the nearly limitless possibilities of the art of painting. Whereas Leslie's art is direct, spontaneous, and wants to be painterly with visible brushstrokes, intense colors, and dramatic composition, Jane Godfrey places the medium in a very different context. She takes letters and envelopes that date back to the 19th century, photographs them, and then uses the prints as the support of

her work, covering some or most of the words and letters with paint. The creases and folds of the letter paper serve as compositional armature, in many cases acting as a grid giving her work a quiet classical order of verticals and horizontals. Jane also leaves the stains or spots on the paper, the result I assume from aging, from exposure to mold and mildew [www.biblio.com > [Collecting Books](#) > [Care and Preservation](#)]. What for paper conservationists would be alien elements that need to be reigned in, in Jane's art they are part and parcel of her work, adding texture and value, and of course the important dimension of time. If I had to place Jane's art in an art-historical context, I would say that her approach is widely shared by post-modernists—their technique of mixing of media (photography and painting), the practice of appropriation (old letters and envelopes), and the element of playfulness as seen in her revealing and obscuring of messages that the letters originally conveyed.

Upstairs, in the MacFeely Gallery, we are dealing with an eminently contemporary medium—digital photography. I believe most of us will agree that this new medium has helped us immensely taking pictures that are in focus and correctly exposed. Producing acceptable pictures has become easier than at any time in the 175-years history of photography. On the other hand, my fear is that it has become much more difficult to use photography as a serious artistic medium. With Photoshop the possibilities appear infinite. Where does experimenting end and the shaping of coherent expression begin? When we hung the prints of Bob Tetro in the attractive space of the MacFeely Gallery, I was truly taken by his remarkable mastery of the digital medium. Instead of shooting more images of panoramic views of Yellowstone National Park, Bob Tetro pointed his camera downwards, "shooting into the dirt," as he explains in his YouTube, and explored the patterns, textures, and colors of the ground. The way Bob reveals the quality of grandeur, which we usually associate with Yellowstone, through his images of detail, such as stones, rock, mosses, grasses, is truly impressive.

Let me stop here. Whatever we may think of individual paintings or photographs in this month's exhibition, Leslie, Jane, and Bob keep reminding us of the relevance of painting and the photographic print, and the vitality of art in the Greater Washington area.

Thank you.

Now I would like the artists to come up here to speak much better than I possibly can about their art. Let's start with

- Leslie Nolan.
- Jane Godfrey
- Bob Tetro.