

**The Remains of the Day:  
The work of Isabel Sabino**

One of the most famous western narratives on the conundrums of representation comes to us from Greek Antiquity, from Pliny's *Natural History*. In this much cited parable of realism, Pliny recounts a competition between Zeuxis, the master painter, and his young challenger Parrhasius. Zeuxis' painting of grapes is so lifelike that the birds flew down to eat from the painted vine. Parrhasius then painted a picture of a curtain realistic to such a degree that Zeuxis cried out for his rival to draw the curtain and show his picture. 'On discovering his mistake', Pliny tells us, 'he surrendered the prize to Parrhasius, admitting candidly that he, Zeuxis, had deceived only the birds, while Parrhasius had deceived himself, a painter.'

Where Zeuxis had deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived the painter: at the heart of *trompe l'oeil* — as the French term reveals — lies deception. Deception and seduction. The shifts between differing ontological levels are elided by such representations: they tease us into involvement with the image. The mimetic skin of the illusionistic representation not only deceives the viewer that the represented scene is real, it is also, traditionally, itself a kind of *vanitas*. The Dutch still life painters of the 17th century allegorised the skill of such mimetic representation as yet one more piece of ephemera, vainly strutting in the face of inevitable corrosion and obliteration. *Trompe l'oeil* is ultimately a melancholy art: while challenging death with the illusion of permanence, it recognizes its own conceit.

*Trompe l'oeil* in Isabel Sabino's work seems to serve a similar allegoric function— she is an artist hungry for allegorical meaning, for hidden connections between resonant signifiers. For her, *trompe l'oeil* serves to highlight both seduction and the end of seduction. There are many little private jokes: allusions to snippets of both life and art. Delicious and familiar items of Portuguese confectionary, the eyes of martyred Saint Lucy, Duchamp's bottle rack and Zeuxis' own grapes find their way into compositions which abound, too, with more abstract explosions of calligraphy, of paint and colour.

There are more humble objects too. In all of them, narrative is implicit — in the torn up letters or simple notes pinned onto the studio door ('back soon'), the cigarette butts and empty, broken peanut shells. These are all traces and signs: someone has been there, come and gone. Olives and their pips are telling narrative indeces: between the olive and its pip there is an implicit temporal span, a process that unfolds in time: the act of eating. Like the torn up letter or the cigarette butt, the olive pip is both the physical trace and the reminder of a past *action*. Narrative is, if excluded as *action*, always implicit as *trace* in these works. The works themselves, then, are a kind of archaeological site in which the external surface hides layers of both event and meaning.

The illusionistic objects in Sabino's work are, in a sense, the opposite of the readymades they appear to be: their effortlessly rendered surfaces erase the time and labour of their facture in favour of the illusion that these objects have, somehow, always been there. This — as Duchamp himself knew — is the legacy of both the illusionistic, post-Renaissance painter of pictures and of the skilled but unapplauded work of the 'anonymous' painters of signs and billboards. Alongside these objects, rendered with the deft confidence of a sign painter, Isabel Sabino offers us a compendium of painted surfaces whose spatial metaphor is 'collage': pieced together, these heterogeneous, often deliciously decorative surfaces are vestiges too. They are traces of a physical process (that of painting itself) where the energy of painting, pouring, mark-making, is contained by more geometric, structuring elements.

One of the marks of our times, of the 'post-modern' in picture-making, is that the painted surface of pictures can no longer be regarded as an illusionistic, vertical window onto a mimetically represented world (Zeuxis' grapes) but must be regarded, metaphorically, as a horizontal surface, a table on which a plethora of represented objects mingle, overlap, collide. David Salle knew this in the 1980s; long before him, already in the late 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg knew it too. Gathering the detritus of daily life — from the studio, from the home — in both images and marks, Isabel Sabino lays before us a table of contents without providing us with the connecting thread. The fragmentary bursts of information, both painterly and illusionistic, collide with one another, begging each time for narrative re-invention.

The hybrid surfaces of Sabino's work, then, are at once palimpsests which hide and reveal past actions (painting, drawing) and homages to past styles in

western art, from antiquity through to modernism. And because what links these disjunctive elements is the consciousness that has brought them into being — the artist's own — these works bespeak a subjectivity that remains always just beyond interpretative reach, always just a little bit elusive. In the dialectical play between absence and presence (whether in the physical marks of paint on canvas or paper, or in the *trompe l'oeil* objects, physical remains of human presence) there is always an implicit pastness: a kind of nostalgia for something that has left its mark but that no longer is. Despite their effusive energy, their delight in decoration, these works beguilingly reveal the underlying melancholy touching upon any *vanitas*: the acute awareness of eventual decay, of the passage of time. It is a passage, however, that is always redeemed by painting itself — the history of painting as well as its processes; indeed the history that collects and re-presents those very processes.

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