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Flickering Purgatories: Jane Dickson paints Vegas

by David Brody

Jane Dickson: Eat Slots, Play Free at Valentine Gallery

March 23 to April 15, 2012

464 Seneca Avenue, between Himrod and Harman streets,
Ridgewood, Queens, (718) 381-2962



Jane Dickson, LV42 (Binions), 2012. Oil on canvas, 24 x48 inches. Courtesy of Valentine Gallery

Jane Dickson's sunless, shadowless neon casino interiors and exteriors grip your eye with a blunt, slow-burning shrewdness, getting right to the point about matters that have deep roots in the torch-lit hells of Caravaggio, the flickering purgatories of Georges de La Tour, and — nearer to hand — the existential roadside mercury vapors of George Ault or Edward Hopper. It is no special insight of Dickson's that night-for-day Las Vegas is the punitive afterlife our rapidly apocalyptic moment deserves, but artists who've risen to the subject — photographers and filmmakers by and large — tend to take the visual spectacle at awestruck face value, while treating its thematics with moralizing condescension.

Dickson's steady, sober vision strips the distracting fluff away down to architectural bones that show casinos to be a kind of peopled re-enactment of 20th century abstraction at its most positivist — from Kandinsky to Frank Stella to Richard Anuszkiewicz — and maybe all the more despairing for that.

Dickson's hieratics of the everyday made its first impact with sharply lurid shadowplays of the Times Square sex industry in the 1980's, and has various contemporary affinities, including with the East Village punk realism of Martin Wong and Eric Drooker, the luminous urban structuralism of Yvonne Jacquette, and the visionary deliberation of animator Suzan Pitt. But it is Georges Seurat's melting conté crayon studies and his Pointillist artifice that now resonate most deeply in Dickson's erosion of contour, her sensual treatment of auras of light that simplify figures almost to the point of cartoons, yet short of bruising their essential dignity. For some years Dickson forced the issue by painting on AstroTurf, a medium of extreme scatter, honing her rationalizing eye on green and blue noise. Here she applies the softly brutal lessons-learned to canvas, with a new emphasis on subtle contrasts of surface and paint handling. One might say that Las Vegas's neon, in all its hyper-synthetic cheer, does for Dickson what blazing limelight did for Seurat: for him, the circus; for her, it's Circus Circus.



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