

Amie Oliver
Coincidence Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
February 10 – March 17

“Walls and Bridges,” Amie Oliver’s solo exhibition at Coincidence Gallery, is a mass marriage of painting, sculpture, scripture and architecture – a postmodernist archeological dig into the ancient turf of art history. Her references to history are emphasized by that fact that her iconography of figures and landscapes has been mounted on what appear to be brittle fragments of fallen walls, but which, on closer inspection, are found to be thick chunks of Styrofoam. From its inception, each individual work is never intact, never more than an exquisite remnant. Thus, it is a complete *vanitas*, an anthology of fragile human endeavor on its own packing material.

The terrain of Oliver’s art is the haunted house between mortality and immortality. It is both remote and mnemonic, restful and futile. Here and there, the viewer is awarded a fleeting sense of *déjà vu*, in the abstract suggestions of land in sun (the glare of the unaltered paper) and shadow (the inky presence of amorphous painted areas), there is the memory of visiting an unfamiliar site that one somehow knows by heart, a place in which one senses that others like oneself have struggled and ultimately succumbed in their negotiations with time. Oliver works her sepia landscapes in the same restrained palette in all of her paintings, - the pigments of bare soil, dry blood, bone and drought. It is the desiccation, in fact, that unifies all subject matter here.

Oliver’s accomplished illustrative style occasionally recalls the breathy, stroked studies of Renaissance artists. But throughout the show there is a sterner vein of self-portraiture. One, especially, looks not unlike Lucas Cranach the Elder holding back a punchline, underscoring the viewer’s dawning suspicion that there is wit lurking in this body of work.

Oliver also incorporates repeat appearances by the classical Venus into her work. In the leveled landscape, one wonders how Venus has managed to sustain her physical integrity. It is a question that walks with Oliver along the boundary of irony. In *fin de siècle*, the familiar form of Venus de Milo, her drapery forever falling away, faces a classical counterpart who seems to be her own reflection, yet exhibits indistinct attributes that translate as masculinity or modesty. Whatever might occur from this confrontation, the implications of their meeting do not bear easy fruit.

While the viewer is mostly immediately lured by the figurative pieces, the more abstract works are ultimately the most resonant and lingering, as well as the hardest to translate. Two visual pursuits considered in this body of work are crypts and calligraphic forms. The crypts are small two and three-dimensional dug-outs, places on the landscape that one might wish to examine or avoid depending on one’s psychological bent. The calligraphy, which introduces sporadic slashes of intense red into the exhibition, is painted with the driest brush, scattering a trail of absences in its wake.

Many of the calligraphic pieces take the form of books. Here, the viewer is faced with illegible markings for which there is no access, no translation. It is possible that these messages contain great wisdom or are meaningless – which one is the better possibility, given that their codes cannot be broken? For the moment, it is simply an ominous, lyrical design left to the functions of the imagination. If scripture can be entrusted to guide the faithful to some ultimate promise by assuming an authoritative stance. Oliver’s scripture is the ordained administrator of her *vanitas* pieces, whose handiwork reminds the viewer that all is futile, save the soul. By abstractly mingling these two dogmatic strategies, Oliver’s work does save the soul, which seems to be at least as immortal as polystyrene.

