



TAKING OFF THE GLOVES



There are certain paintings that refuse to leave the mind. Not necessarily the most beautiful (like Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*) or the most awe-inspiring (say Frederick Church's *Niagara Falls*), but images that resist resolution, that appear almost unsolvable. Images that require contemplation and invite interpretation. One immediately thinks of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, of its multiple viewpoints and perspectival puzzles that underlie the compositional hierarchy. Or Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, full of layered allegories pertaining to the meaning of life and art. Here would also be included Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, a painting of "baffling complexity," as one painter friend described it. On a less grand scale and of more recent vintage, it can be said that De Chirico's lonely piazzas, Duchamp's bicycle wheel, Dali's melting clocks, and Jasper Johns' enigmatic *Racing Thoughts* (the one with pictures of Mona Lisa and Leo Castelli, with Grunewald backdrop) fit comfortably in this category. Or uncomfortably, because despite the fact that they stimulate a desire to decipher their allusive imagery, they often leave the viewer with a considerable uneasiness. In fact, in many cases we are lured into a kind of seductive space that may not contain, or not be, the comfy armchair that Matisse so urbanely proffered.

Greg Drasler's paintings have left their imprint on my mind since I first encountered them in 1987, during the artist's second show at Rosemary Erpf's gallery. I was immediately struck by the curious visual conundrums in his work that were presented with such technical facility. As accessible as they appeared to be, their content was something altogether different. Were these amalgams of disparate images, often from another era, meant as commentary of a social or political nature, or were they personal reflections disguised as witty historical parables? What is to be gleaned from images such as the desolate railway stations (or later, airline terminals) with abandoned classic luggage, the lone suitcase hanging like a corpse from an apple tree, or the baseball player who stands imperturbably in the center of a small lake? The pleasure of such paintings, not to mention their perplexing titles, resides in their openness to multiple readings. Not one to spell things out, Drasler insists on the viewer's involvement, if not complicity, in the proceedings. Logic is suspended, naturalism is placed in service of the metaphorical. If a man walks down the street carrying glowing fluorescent lights, perhaps miraculous events are still possible even if only, as has probably always been the case, in a painting.



Drasler's recent series of paintings of interiors represents a switch from the clearly allegorical to the incidental and even the metaphysical. Whereas in the past Drasler often employed the figure to carry the painting's essential message, the absence of the figure from the interiors gives them a distinct quality of foreboding; their exclusion only serves to deepen the mystery. The interiors offer a space for Drasler to explore nuances of time and location, rather like being an artist in a time machine, gathering images for recycling. In addition, Drasler mixes periods and places with insidious dexterity, only to make these collaged interiors seem, at first glance, perfectly "right."

Take, for example, *Aviary*, in which a curved entranceway frames an elaborate geometric ceiling supported by a wall covered with a traditional oriental landscape. A bird cage in the shape of a frame house is mounted on the wall. Nearby, a small framed picture of a single-engine plane sits below a painted berry bush. The little plane would easily fit inside the bird cage; its frame seems to have been cut from the ceiling pattern. With its central position anchoring the composition, the plane could represent the bridge between two traditions, the cultural and the art historical. Almost escaping notice, a bird swing hangs by a string from the ceiling. Is it a contemporary fable about artistic freedom? Drasler moves surreptitiously from the seemingly haphazard to the carefully arranged setting; like a stage director who wants everything to look completely unstructured and natural, even when it is anything but.

The humorous side of the artist's work readily emerges in paintings such as *Changing Room* and *Umbrella*, both of which deal with the obfuscation of interior and exterior space. The tradition of trompe-l'oeil painting, of course, goes back to Roman times, when such decorations served as architectural and landscape fantasies for the inhabitants' diversion. Drasler's landscaped walls might be playful takes on Italianate idylls or fragments of a Watteau, but most often they are free inventions. In *Changing Room*, Drasler evokes the Surrealist juxtapositions of Magritte when he paints draped sheets in front of a nocturnal landscape, reflected in a side mirror that augments the spatial illusion. Almost entirely camouflaged are two closed doors that might be closets or a passageway to an equally exotic room. The vaulted ceiling shows the tops of darkened trees, a golden urnlike lamp is suspended from it, glowing like a luminous vessel. As the occupant of the room, the viewer is expected to change, somehow; but into what and for whom? We are screened from nature itself, vaguely protected from the world outside. Could this be a landscape of the mind, one which partially conceals its content? Ultimately, Drasler wants us inside the picture; after that, our choice remains one of several interpretations, rather than one of specific solutions.

In a variation on this theme, *Umbrella* offers another panoramic vista, but this time without visual impediment. Resembling one of those remarkable western expanses (the kind easterners always dream about), the wallpaper follows the length of the room into a corner. There, leaning against a recessed wall that slightly distorts the landscape, is a black umbrella, ready for use. Above a frieze of glacial peaks is a velvety green ceiling with a golden sunlike (Art Deco?) ornament. The viewer is enticed to take the road that heads off into the distance. Where does it lead? For the artist there is no choice; it must be traveled. Drasler asks us to take that road with him, wherever it might take us, through a land of illusion and endless possibilities. The umbrella could be our passport, to be used anytime our own world gets too small or confining. Surely this is all one can ask of a painting; an invitation into a space where fiction and reality coexist for our delectation and, one might add, edification. Greg Drasler continues to make paintings that challenge the viewer as they slowly reveal their wry and portentous secrets.

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