

## NEW YORK

**Andrew Grassie**  
Elizabeth Harris Gallery  
529 West 20th St., 10011  
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In his American debut, London-based Andrew Grassie exhibited 24 paintings, grouped by subjects which included hotel interiors, vacation home exteriors, and head shots of astronauts in space helmets or suits. The paintings describe a homogenized world where one interior is a simulacra of the next, where aprons or sportswear become uniforms that replace the individual as a marker of human presence. The artist reinforces this anonymity by selecting images from holiday brochures and the Internet, copying them assiduously to sidestep expressiveness, and leaving viewers to interpret the results. For Grassie such methods are objective, even classical; indeed, his transformation of the contemporary idyll from the pastoral landscapes of Claude Lorrain to hotel rooms underscores the point. Nonetheless, the intense and sustained pictorial engagement

of this process are images of a fascinating yet helpless little monster frozen in a death agony; we are attracted to this creature and even feel compassionate toward it, but we are also repelled by the stark brutality of the images and, paradoxically, the weakness of the subject.

On the opposite wall from *Rock-a-bye Baby*, Coolen placed *Baby Blanket*, which both mirrored and softened the former's impact. Here a border of small shots of single feathers surrounds a nine-count grid of larger photos of unruly piles of feathers. Too disorderly to be nests, but arresting in their wildness, they are attractive rather than threatening.

These two examples illustrate how Coolen is able to finely balance and nuance emotions and meanings that in everyday life seem to be in conflict.

*Michael Weinstein is a Chicago-based photography critic.*

within many of the paintings undermines the idealistic detachment of their construction.

For this reason the hotel interiors are the best, most focused paintings. Tempera on panel, they employ a deep perspectival space in the Flemish tradition wherein subjective decisions about color heightening and brushwork occur. Daylight scenes darken each room to frame the action on the patio beyond; night scenes make them stages for the dynamics of shadow. Orange lamps, blue skies, and bedspread patterns become bright spots of color that illuminate otherwise neutral areas. Black outlined mirrors and railings startle the eye with graphic flatness while conjuring associations to geometric abstraction and the planar spatial constructions of Piero della Francesca. The far-flung locations of the paintings' titles suggest a visual equalization that

is promptly dismantled in the subtle observation of minute differences within each room's decor.

Objectivity implies a larger perspective, or conversely, a lack of investment. As perceived by Grassie, objectivity transcends personal intent and redefines painting as depersonalized production. When he carries through on this intent, as in the generically painted astronaut portraits, the paintings fail. Their message, that "you can't tell a book by its cover," naively oversimplifies the complexity of human experience. When rationale is overtaken by keen visual absorption, the paintings succumb to a pictorial intelligence that is not reducible to polarities of objective/subjective but lies inexplicably somewhere between.

*Elisabeth Condon is a painter based in New York.*

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*Hotel Bali, Bieniendena, Costa Del Sol, 1995. Tempera on board, 4 1/4" x 6".  
Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery.*

