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SEARCH:

William Harsh's Inner States

Vessel Gallery mounts a final retrospective of the admired expressionist painter.

By Alex Bigman

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Around the time William Harsh began painting, Pablo Picasso died. The old master left the young artist with, aside from a lifetime's worth of inspiration, one quip that would reverberate throughout his career: "The kind of painting I like is the kind you can drive a nail through."

Characteristically enigmatic, Picasso here meant that a painting should be structurally sound, its forms well distributed. However, he was also speaking about a certain relationship between painting and the world: However abstract the former might seem, you should still be able to nail it into the hard reality of the latter. "From the beginning," said Harsh in recent interview with his wife, "that was the kind of toughness in painting I was after."

A year and a half ago, Harsh, who had been living and working in Benicia since the mid-1980s, was diagnosed with cancer. A few months ago, facing the heartbreaking fact that the end was not far off, Harsh and his art dealer, Lonnie Lee, began preparing to mount a final retrospective. Now on view at Vessel Gallery, Inside Out, A William Harsh Retrospective presents a triumphant array of the artist's work from the early Nineties to the present — the period that Harsh considered to be his artistic maturity (and which began, not coincidentally, in the wake of seeing a 1992 exhibition of Picasso still-lives in Paris).

Harsh's paintings themselves appear to be still-lives — piled jumbles of drawers, tables, chairs, easels, masks, fabric, and so forth. Rendered in sumptuous color and outlined in bold, ribbonlike black strokes, the depicted objects sometimes retain their character; other times they give way to abstraction, coalescing into what look like grand, bizarre architectural forms.

But while Harsh described his works as "impelled by" the immediate world of everyday objects, the sensuous wreckage on his canvases is in fact an invention of imagination and memory. He never used models (a brilliant draftsman, he didn't need to), being above all interested in marrying "inner states" to the process of painting itself: the exigencies of flat canvas of fixed literal proportions, smeared with drying oil paint. At a time when the medium seemed almost out of fashion, Harsh remained, thoroughly, a painter's painter. "Painting can express certain things that other media can't, and no doubt other media can express

things that painting is too limited to do, but I am definitely a painter," said Harsh. "I have chosen to go deeply into that."

Unfortunately, Harsh would not live to see his final exhibition; he passed away the night his works left Benicia for installment. But with this rich retrospective now hanging, he is in every position to do as Picasso did for him: inspire other young artists, for whom there are certain things that can only be expressed in paint.


Inside Out, A William Harsh Retrospective runs through December 1 at Vessel Gallery (471 25th St., Oakland). 510-893-8800 or Vessel-Gallery.com

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