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ART

Bringing New Definition to Abstraction

Mary Beyt's paintings exude a substance, beauty and technique that together are helping rewrite the rules of her genre.

May 25, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

NEW YORK — Painter Mary Beyt's studio is surrounded by the drama and detritus of life in this city's Bowery district--corner markets and liquor stores, wholesale restaurant suppliers and Chinese eateries. Inside the converted warehouse, however, the walls are blooming with paintings of flowers, prancing ponies, swimming swans and quaint villages.

One can't help but wonder if the young artist, who grew up in Beaumont, Texas, and Lafayette, La., isn't compensating for the absence of sensual beauty in her current environs. Her paintings, which will be in an exhibition titled "Double Vision," which opened last week at L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice, are radiant with both substance and technique, qualities that have become rare in late 20th century art.

Dressed fashionably casual in a black turtleneck and chinos, Beyt looks younger than her 37 years. She peers from behind wire-rimmed glasses and acknowledges: "People say my paintings are too beautiful. But I think it's absurd to think that painting has to be ugly to be real. There is a lot of beautiful art. There is a certain elitism that keeps some people at bay when they think they are too beautiful. I don't see it as something I should fight against. But I know that it irritates people."

Beyt's large-scale canvases of the past few years were covered in intricately detailed images of flowers painted monochromatically onto acid pastel backgrounds, such as fuchsia or aqua. More recently, she has added patterns of landscapes and animals rendered in sage, marine and chartreuse to her repertoire. Despite a common prejudice in contemporary art circles against such romantic imagery, Beyt's exhibitions have been praised by critics for their unusual combination of intelligence and aesthetic potency. After her 1996 show at the well-regarded Morris/Healy Gallery in Chelsea, critic Robert Mahoney wrote in the New York entertainment journal Time Out that Beyt "plays a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek that ultimately calls into question just what does--and does not--constitute proper abstraction."

Pattern is the issue. To combine both abstract and figurative components in her work, Beyt silk-screens sheets of inexpensive lace dipped in white paint onto a colored canvas. Pointing to several works in progress, she says that in using the silk-screened lace, she is making reference to the conceptualist tradition of using ready-made materials. Yet Beyt identifies more with the traditional medium of painting, and she only uses lace as a template.

"I paint over the lace image until it is invisible except for the ghostly background pattern. There might be five leaves in the lace pattern but there are 50 leaves in the painting. I've added clouds, swans, trees. I'm taking a ready-made and reclaiming it by painting over it with thousands of marks so it becomes an

abstract thing."

Beyt spends as much as a month on each picture, but her obsession with detail is part of what lends the completed works their resonance and depth.

"I'm reclaiming this commercially made thing with a labor-intensive process," she says. One picture features a landscape where idealized horses frisk in the foreground and cumuli drift across the horizon. Beyt holds up a piece of the nylon lace to show the crude outline of her scene. "See?" she asks. "No clouds, no crosshatching, no deep space."

Beyt began using lace along with stencils of abstract shapes shortly after completing the prestigious art studio graduate program at Yale in 1987.

"I began to realize that I was not an abstract painter," she says. "I'd gone into Yale a figurative painter and [despite painting abstractions] I had remained a figurative painter. So I started painting into these flower stencils and thinking, 'How do I make a figurative painting that makes sense nowadays?'"

Repeating the lace flower in an overall pattern inspired Beyt's more recent scenic landscapes, which sometimes repeat once or twice per canvas.

"I am painting with all these references to traditional scene painting, such as linear narrative," she explains, "so I started to take into consideration the timing in the painting as an element of abstraction. I've taken a linear story and instead of a beginning, middle and end, I repeat it to create an abstract notion of time, where you see the middle, the end, then the beginning."

She reinforced abstraction through her use of a single color: "I want the overall color to act against the narrative influence, where the horse is white, the tree is green, the house is red. This way, the color is a thing itself. I'm painting these idyllic landscapes, but the last thing I want is for you to have a sappy romantic experience--so the color is keyed up. If the imagery is sweet, the color is sweeter--like when you eat so much candy, your tongue swells up."

The pastel hues and the choice of lace have led some critics to read Beyt's pictures as radically feminist. Beyt becomes quite furious at the suggestion:

"One reason I stopped making the flower paintings, and what pisses me off no end, is when people think that I'm trying to make a feminist remark about a male tradition. That is so superficial, it's ridiculous."

She laughs at her own vehemence. "I hope I have a little more to offer than just referencing a male tradition that I have to conquer. I can just exploit it. The idea of making a monochrome painting is just a vocabulary to me, not a tradition I'm trying to defend or resurrect."

Beyt displays the logical bent of her father, an attorney, and the patience of her mother, a schoolteacher. Now retired, her parents live in Lafayette. Beyt was the only girl of five siblings, and as a youth she attended parochial school and took art classes part time at the local college. She went on to earn her bachelor's in fine art at Washington University in St. Louis in 1982. During the summer before graduation she was selected to participate in the Yale Norfolk Summer Program of Painting and Music in Connecticut. This introduction to a rigorous faculty and fellow aspiring artists fueled her ambition; she moved to New York and supported herself by working part time for a law firm, but after three years she decided to enter graduate school, at Yale, from where she earned her master's degree from the School of Art and Architecture.

"At Yale," she recalls, "you become really responsible for every aspect of the painting. But it is also a big boys' club. A guy could say something and it would be taken seriously, but if a woman said something, she'd have to document it and have reinforcement."

Yale also was steeped in the traditions of academic painting.

"I don't want to sound like the hopeless romantic," she says, "but there is a distancing you can get with paint that you don't get with photographs and mass-produced images."

After graduate school, Beyt returned to New York, married Douglas English and resumed her part-time position at the law firm for two more years until her paintings started to generate recognition and revenue. Between the apartment where she lives with her husband, who works in television advertising, and her studio, she keeps four cats and a dog.

"A lot of people today make art where the content of the story line is important," she says. "I don't buy that. It's not the choice of the subject matter but how the subject matter is portrayed. Lace is something that had almost no significance, so it wouldn't be the image that is important. I'm using the familiarity of the subject matter to exploit my painting desires. I guess I'm taking a traditional genre and trying to complicate it by imposing rules that I've set up."

"I'm trying to liberate the viewer by suggesting that he or she no longer think in a linear sense," she adds. "Abstraction isn't just a way of liberating paint but a way of liberating thinking."

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"MARY BEYT: DOUBLE VISIONS," L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice. Dates: Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Ends July 3. Phone: (310) 822-4955.