

Thomas Woodruff

at JAN BAUM, 22 April–29 May

Thomas Woodruff was yearning so for the age of innocence that he felt compelled to recreate it. In three suites of impeccable pictures completed since 1991, he revives the iconography and style of the nineteenth-century academy: Pre-Raphaelite maidens wreathed by question marks of roses, distant Edenic landscapes, trompe l'oeil playing cards and glass beads, and garlands of ivy and fruit. The pictures reek of the romantic and leave the impression that Woodruff is consumed with a passion for the past—not necessarily as it was, but as it was painted.

As sources for this determinedly atavistic work, one may look to the British and American schools: Cole and Bierstadt mythologizing the paradisiacal landscape; Burne-Jones and Rosetti idealizing the portrayal of women; Harnett finding allegory in the common object.

One series of meticulously overstated paintings entitled *The Question Mark Girl, She Looks Toward the Future* (1992-3) comprises works which each depict a racial and cultural stereotype, and are labeled accordingly: red, yellow, blue (for an alien), as well as white, black, and brown. Woodruff has painted each according to the fantasies of exotic belief and colonial imperative. The Native American appears as Pocahontas, complete with teepee in a golden glade; she is represented as a trophy, a portrait mounted over a mantel, a painting within a painting. The cozy hearth features an iron cauldron, a rocking chair, and a pair of turkey puppets to signify Thanksgiving, the source of Anglo-Indian lore. The African woman is poised amid spiderwebs and giant moths, and before a mysterious savanna upon which an arch of elephant trucks bears a bunch of shrunken heads, and in which the monkeys are stuffed toys and the anthuriums have eyes. The white woman stands before the Emerald City in the land of Oz, where the sunflowers are animated and the serpents friendly. The works draw from Delacroix's seraglio and Remington's Old West, and are infused with an art history according to Walt Disney.

Woodruff chronicles the loss of these painting styles and the sure-footedness of their ideology. The hard-won lyrical representation of his pictures in a contemporary context confronts the modernist ideal of progress. His abundant talents as a painter permit him the strategy of leaping back to a pre-modern era in search of a pop-culture style with grandeur and operatic complexity. In the process, Woodruff documents the sources of pop-cultural clichés, producing pictures which can seem a little touchy in the new academy of the politically correct. Paintings from two and three years ago demonstrate a concentrated endeavor toward the representation of that which is taboo in such an academy: nostalgia and sentiment. *Sweet and Sour Babies* (1992) seems to be a serial portrait of one child with a rather grown-up range of expressions, ranging from the demonic to the hilarious, each surrounded by a trompe l'oeil frame of varied silliness—playing cards, giant color-swirled lollypops, slices of citrus fruits, bat wings, and candy corn.

The rather archly titled *Chromatic Aberrations* (1991) combines greeting card imagery with Old Master technique: puppies, kittens, bunnies, and chicks are surrounded by bowers of companionably colored flowers. These are shocking in a way that scatology no longer can be. They are stunning in their blatant inoffensiveness—a gesture worthy of Jeff Koons, but without the army of Italian studio assistants. *Rose Adagio* (1993-94) is a nine-panel painting reminiscent of both Rembrandt and Ryder. A small bird, flapping furiously in space, is joined by an increasing number of roses, then left with a decreasing number of plain thorny branches. An obvious effort at *vanitas* painting, it underscores the seriousness of the larger exhibition. To engage loss without bathos is a challenge here well met.

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Thomas Woodruff
*The Question-Mark Girl, She Looks
Toward the Future—Check A: White, 1993*
Acrylic on linen
69" x 45"

Thomas Woodruff
*Chromatic Aberration,
Cyncere Cympathy—Yellow, 1991*
Acrylic on canvas
32-1/2" x 32-1/2"

