

NOVEMBER 27, 2009

Bill Rodgers at Skew Gallery

*

The books we encounter and live with, particularly the antique or flea-market find, eventually take on a knowingness and even a gaze. These books not only link to the past but link to the moment of the find, unexpectedly reactivating traces of ourselves. The statement for Bill Rodgers' recent exhibition 'Studies in Citizenship' echoes the ceremonial, austere presence of his chosen subject: the early 20th century reference book for rural Canadians. These books evoke a "rigor of self-reliance", declaring themselves through modest covers and "self conscious and distilled" titles which suggest the boundaries and necessity of their contents. Rodgers' antique books as subject act as link between early communities' collective, industrious use of knowledge, and a history of painting devoted to the materialization of daily vision.

On the main wall of the gallery, Rodgers has installed a grid of eighteen paintings of books which appear to be painted from observation. Given their original books' earnest titles like "Songs of Service" and the accidentally droll "What and How", these books suggest both a general and morally-toned approach to instruction. Each painting's details of book-cover tones, textures, and even weight, are vividly rendered while placed in the center of a white ground in contrasting painterly strokes which glint like velvet in the light. The manner in which Rodgers has rendered the intense detail of aged cloth and tiny worn patches suggest decades of intimate handling. This brings to mind James Elkin's writing on portraiture, wherein paint, colour, and light both embody and caress the subject, evoking the artist's labour and devotion.

Rodgers speaks of using a realist style of painting the books as a result rather than a deliberate effect, wherein he intended to show "a scientific place rather than a human space." His decision to place the book subjects in the center of a painterly white expanse was meant to heighten the presence of the books, as well as to avoid the narrative of a "sentimental domestic setting". This inherently guides the viewer's focus from the book as image-icon to the book as painted space. Rodgers also speaks of his antique book subjects as having been "archived" in the space of painting. This is an interesting link, as both painting and archive are ideal spaces for close study and an inherent transformation of the subject through re-visitation.

The word "rhyparographer" is spelled out upon a found-object piece of carefully arranged painter's tools, fragments of textured glass, and staggered CDs, all positioned upon a simple black shelf. Of the arranged

objects, the artist explains: "The tools, and yes Dixie Chicks, represents a mode of translation from the object (still life) to painted image without the aid of photomechanical/digital reproduction." Various dictionaries define rhyparographer as "the painting of mean, low, or trivial subjects", and Rodgers cites the use of the word from writer Norman Bryson, who has written extensively on the history of the still life and its influence within Modernist painting. In an essay exploring its early role in the work of Cotan, Caravaggio, and Chardin, Bryson writes of the artists' shared intentions of conveying "forms so copious or prolix", their vividness would short-circuit viewers' automatic tendencies "to screen out the unimportant and not see, but scan" [1].

Two sets of companion pieces hang opposite the book paintings. These nine drawings and nine smaller versions of the painted books are presented behind heavily textured glass, which blurs and refuses a clear view of each painting or drawing. Rodgers asserts: "in this instance, I put into question the meaning of our desire to see more clearly. The 18 book paintings are declarative in extreme: "this is what I see"; the works under glass ask the question:" is this what I see?" While the glass freezes these works into a hounds-tooth pattern or mimics the liquidy shift of Photoshop smear, its strategy of obfuscation frustrates rather than retains seduction of the desiring eye.

In contrast to the coolness of the companion pieces, the book paintings seem to assert their presence in excess of an exercise in defamiliarizing the layers of vision. Reaffirmed in the paintings' exquisite skin is the intimate architecture of close looking. The antique book cover as subject gives the paintings a strangeness which book designs of the later 20th century, meant for cheaper, quicker digestion, would have lacked. What Rodgers calls the "prime object" sense of the books becomes the element which separates the paintings from mere optical cleverness. This gives the work a presence and subtlety often lost on the immediacy of nostalgic kitsch or the slick special effects of the contemporary trompe l'oeil.

Works cited:

1. Bryson, Norman. *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*. Harvard University Press, 1990. Page 65.