

## Arts

# Brushes With Death

Who says painting has croaked? Art Space 111 performs mouth-to-mouth.

BY ANTHONY MARIANI

Okay, so it's kinda easy to forget about sincere contemporary painting in this, the age of the ironic smirk — and here, in Fort Worth, the land of gargantuan museums devoted to the works of long-dead white men. But, like your mother said, you gotta take your medicine. My advice: Get your butt to Art Space 111 (and *don't* call me in the morning; I sleep late). Painting-with-a-capital-P is alive and well there.

The gallery space itself — if not its current content, a group show featuring a handful of living Texas heroes — is geared toward the deep-pocketed collector; viewings are by appointment only, and the prices affixed to some of the paintings are astronomical. Still, Daniel Blagg, the artist who runs the studio-slash-gallery with his twin brother Dennis Blagg, probably wouldn't mind some extra viewers. Art Space 111, incredibly, remains a hidden gem. Artists know about it, sure, but yokels? Uh-uh.

There's mass appeal in Blagg's "urbanscapes." We're at a time now when even the most casual art observer among us knows all the landscape clichés. This art-challenged person would be able to see the traditions Blagg subverts in a piece such as "Far From the East." The focal point of the work, a

shuttered Chinese restaurant, collects sunlight along a strip of neighborhood you probably wouldn't want your children hanging around in. The perspective is of a person standing across the street and facing the side of the one-story, predominantly white building. The walls are chipped. The yellow dragon taking up nearly the entire side of the structure looks weather-beaten. There's not a sign of humanity in sight. Compared to, say, Thomas Kinkadee's maudlin renderings of forest cottages — white smoke billowing from their erect chimneys, apple pies steaming on their window panes, brilliant colored flowers crowding their corners — Blagg's painting is a brave, calculated act of aggression.

A typical topic in a Blagg "urbanscape" is some otherwise insignificant piece of the city fabric retold as a fable about deterioration, the ephemeral. A solitary, burnt-orange shack in the distance begs for acknowledgment in a sea of deep-gold grass, between dying brown trees and a dark, rolling train. An aluminum-sided house gathers shadows, while on the other side of the street, in the background, the pavement glows with sunlight. Carnival rides are constellations of light bulbs in an indigo night. Somewhere, in his crumbling bricks or his faceless marquees, there might be a comment or two on urban decay. What Blagg is trying to say is, thankfully, not quite clear; the pictures aren't there to inspire hand-wringing as much as they are to conjure up in you the sensation of having wrestled with a trigonometry proof and come away with the right answer. It, like the fading dragon on the side

of the Chinese restaurant (possibly there on the side of the road on your way into work), was there all along — you just had to work a little to discover it.

Wallace Stevens once said, "Death is the mother of beauty." And what was true for his poetry is also true for Blagg's work — and for Bill Haveron's nightmarish concoctions. They're "symbolic" without any handy references. "Van Gogh Pole" is a crafty, mixed-media iteration (replete with two empty Pepto-Bismol and Viagra bottles) of the psychology of the deeply troubled master. A green-tinted painting of his bust sits atop a

Daniel Blagg, Matt Clark, Susan Harrington, Bill Haveron, Nancy Lamb  
Thru May 31 at Art Space 111,  
111 Hampton St. FW. By  
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A darling perspective, such as that in "Star Struck," helps artist Nancy Lamb undermine portraiture clichés.

long wooden construct that's somewhere between a crucifix and a telephone pole with side-compartments. These small, square spaces along the thick of the "pole" hold vignettes: A male suitor brings money and flowers to a naked, obese woman, smoking a cigarette; the master hides behind a wall in a dark alley as a couple approaches; a mummy, wearing a mortarboard and sitting at a canvas, paints a rocking chair. Again, there's no "interpreting" Haveron's work (though the truly brave could probably write a doctoral thesis about it). One can only marvel at his boundless imagination.

And, while both Haveron and Blagg are painterly, they're as much about content as they are about form;

Nancy Lamb is mostly all form — and what form it is. Her photorealistic oil paintings brim with sweat equity. Energy. They're mostly about people in social situations, chiefly dinner parties among the over-40 crowd. And while a lot has been written about how the artist allegedly reveals in her works the rot beneath the leisure class, all I ever see in Lamb's paintings are sincerely happy people, having a good time. (Not the point, I understand, but still worth mentioning.) The star "character" in any painting of hers is, of course, the paint itself. In "Star Struck," eyes glow, cheeks

rumple, hands crinkle. Every stroke exudes warmth, as if fashioned out of crushed velvet. You'll be spellbound.

For as much as Lamb adores humanity through her paintbrushes, she also sweetly rejects it. Sometimes in her quest for ever-more-daring perspectives, Lamb — like Blagg — will undermine every cliché you've ever heard about portraiture, by perfectly rendering what could be seen in the three-dimensional, real world as "nothing": partygoers standing around with drinks in their hands, their heads cropped out of the picture but the sleeves of their tuxedos falling crisply; a platinum blonde, startled, looking skyward to the viewer, half her face beyond the frame, but her pink fingernails glowing elegantly; old men playing dominoes at a vibrant blue-and-yellow booth in what could be a fast-food joint, their faces obscured by drooping hats, but the napkin bin between them looming like an icon. Only Lamb's dexterity and grace can keep us from reading these wondrous paintings as the handiwork of a cynic. We love them as much as she must.

Put simply, what's going on at Art Space 111 is probably the best art anywhere in the Metroplex, if not in the entire state of Texas (Marfa included). Not going is sure to bring on a case of cynicism — and you wouldn't want that, would you?

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EXTRA!