



Los Angeles

Robert Russell

Bedford, Christopher, "Robert Russell", Artforum.com Critics Picks, March 15, 2007

ANNA HELWING GALLERY
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Like fellow Los Angeles–based painter Steve Hurd, Robert Russell has an unerring eye for inflammatory material. Unlike Hurd, however, Russell often juxtaposes such images with apparently benign still lifes and saccharine pastel portraits; the effect is manifestly unsettling. The gallery begins to feel a little like a warped, modern *Kunstkammer* or perhaps a perverse suburban living room indiscriminately stuffed with public and private memorabilia. By virtue of proximity, associations inevitably develop between Russell's images, and the viewer is left to grope for links that are tenuous at best. How, for example, might a full-length brushy pastel portrait of a porcelain-skinned ballerina with dead eyes and an impenetrable smile relate to the leering, fleshy portrait of Marvin Heemeyer—the man who drove an armored bulldozer into his local town hall before shooting himself—directly opposite? Russell's larger question, however, has less to do with how images accrue meaning by association than with how his formal treatment of his chosen subjects manipulates the viewer's encounter with their images. It's clear that the act of rendering an image on a flat plane offers the artist a unique opportunity to argue (implicitly) that meaning is constituted through surface alone. One particularly fertile example is a glamorous profile portrait of an American soldier, cheeks gleaming in the sun, his narrow smile an essay in self-assurance. So sleek and heroic is Russell's treatment that it comes as a considerable shock to learn that the subject is, in fact, a very young Timothy McVeigh. Amid this sinister carnival of images, the sustained intelligence of Russell's inquiry into the nature of representation is the only constant.

—Christopher Bedford



View of "Robert Russell: Scattershot," 2007. From left: Timothy McVeigh, 2006; Artificial Arrangement, 2006; Arrangement 3, 2006.