

FRANCESCA DIMATTIO *Table Setting and Flower Arranging*

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BY ERIN YERBY

I remember my grandmother's house not as a whole, but as an arrangement of connected rooms, each one giving me the sense that I was moving through ornate little worlds. Peering back into those lost rooms of my childhood, it seems that what I delighted in was the exuberant consistency of their bright, Southern-inflected patterns and colors, as if each room held secrets in the folds of its textiles and the print of its wallpaper. The feel of these colorful patterns and textures not only created a correspondence between the room itself and the objects within it, but also provided that minimal enclosure necessary for the images of the past to stick in the rooms of memory, now that the house has long disappeared, taking with it all that was sensuously familiar.

The connection between memory and constructed surfaces of pattern, color, and texture became clearer to me upon viewing Francesca DiMattio's exhibition, *Table Setting and Flower Arranging*, at Salon 94 Bowery. Comprising multiple painted vase-like structures, as well as three large-scale paintings, the exhibition plays out a tension-in-contiguity between painterly sculptures and sculptural paintings. As the title implies, the feminine flowers and dainty, intricately designed porcelain fragments evoke a domestic space, yet this domesticity is at the same time defamiliarized through the disfigurement of the vase-like structures, the exaggeration of scale, and the oozing areas of negative space.

DiMattio's sculptural vases—though it would be better to call them bodies—have an almost funerary quality. This is not only because they involve flowers, including lilies, but also because they seem intent on holding together something that has already passed. It is as if DiMattio's vases present to us the afterlife of an implosion, in which the severed fragments are re-constructed into a monument—not as a gesture of nostalgia, but as the repetition of a splintered past that bears evidence of the original dissolution and chaos on its surface. A trace of such dissolution is made visible through dark, solid swaths of dripping paint, as in the blue and green primordial liquidity covering the sculpture "Jingdezhen" (2012), which seems to risk contaminating the otherwise neatly defined fragments of porcelain. The deliquescing effect of the paint is offset by the stubborn materiality of the ceramic itself, its rough clayiness tearing through the surface formality of the delicate porcelain, as in "Milton Vase" (2011). Drawing out the primal qualities of the ceramic, the vases become



Francesca DiMattio, "Guilloche," 2012. Oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas, 108 x 180"; each panel 108 x 90". Image courtesy Salon 94.

monuments both to de-formation and, paradoxically, to the fecund "matter" from which these "colored" fragments of the past grow.

There are, additionally, three large-scale paintings with extraneous materials adhered to them—plastic bags, string, textile cutouts—but this time the material that actually coheres the objects is the paint itself. Paint takes on the function of the ceramic; it allows these extrinsic scraps, blown out of the past of the everyday, to stick to the surface of the image. A double sense of explosive fragmentation and re-constitution is evinced by the long piece of rough string in "Millefleur" (2012), which precariously clings to the canvas under a layer of tar-like black paint, forming the outline of a figure. Of course the paint does more than make things stick: there is a fluid movement between the abstract shapes and figurative moments of painting's dialogue with itself. The neatly painted image of a ship, as in "Guilloche" (2012), as well as the vase of flowers, not only reference painting's history, but also act as nodal points in drawing together the diversity of debris and shapes (the way one might create crests of folds in a tablecloth by gathering it up in certain places).

The excess of shapes within the paintings appears to simultaneously evoke Matisse's cutouts and Picasso's "Guernica," with the playful ironic distance of post-modern referentiality. Yet it is in DiMattio's sculptures that this cacophony of shapes takes on a more distinct presence, and the very procedure of constructing from chaos, with a past always composed of fragments, is made visible, overcoming referentiality. Here, the artist unites the two-dimensional emphasis on



Francesca DiMattio, "Jingdezhen," 2012. China paint and underglaze on porcelain, 12.5 x 16 x 12". Image courtesy Salon 94.

shape (as seen in the porcelain fragments and their patterned surfaces) with the three-dimensional aspect of an object as a quasi-hollow "body"—recalling Michael Fried's apt, albeit polemical, description of minimal art objects as "surrogate bodies." As such, DiMattio's painterly sculptures offer themselves as present encounters with the quasi-bodies of the past.

Inner tensions between painting and sculpture are perhaps most constructively (and thus less ironically) revealed, in this exhibition, when the paintings actually become sculptures—that is, three-dimensional. Taken together, these painterly sculptures and sculptural paintings constitute a "room"—as in those childhood rooms of memory—wherein objects, images, textures, colors, and patterns are experienced together and yet do not form a whole. To return to the past may be impossible, but in DiMattio's recent works the past is repeated in fragments that continue to stick, as it were, to the present, making visible the difference of time. ☞

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