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Amy Bessone's Artificial Appeal

By DANIEL KUNITZ | May 9, 2008

Amy Bessone paints figurines as if they were human beings. This might seem a simple and potentially static approach, yet the 12 large oils in the Los Angeles-based artist's first New York solo show, "With Friends Like These ...," which is spread across Salon 94's uptown and downtown spaces, tremble with ideas, if not exactly with vitality.



Amy Bessone, 'The Dandy and the Raccoon' (2007–08).



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The sexier and more intellectually provocative of the two sets hangs uptown, where one finds four complex takes on the female nude. “Bluebird” (2008), for instance, is a painting of what looks like an Art Deco statuette, in a classical style, of a partially draped nude woman. Depicted in subtly shaded monochrome gray with strong outlining and some modeling, the shorthaired woman sits holding a outlined bird to her naked torso, a maroon tunic or cape falling to her waist. She has one covered leg tucked back and one bare leg folded tightly before her, and she rests the weight of her upper body on her bare left arm.

Although we’re never tempted to read the statuette as a “real” woman, the rendering does cause a kind of sensory confusion. The drawn quality of the woman’s body — the scored marks indicating rough strands of hair, the almost schematic line delineating the shin from thigh on her folded left leg — remains in tension with the sculpted modeling, causing us to see the figure as a figurine. Similarly, the highlights and reflections on the draped fabric make us think simultaneously of polished metal and the fact that this is a painted canvas.

These paintings seem almost to vibrate between representations in two and three dimensions — between painting and sculpture — and this produces a pleasurable dissonance in our experience of them. The metaphoric implications of their strange sexuality add another curious note.

“Woman with Serpent” (2007), for example, is at once a picture of a glistening porcelain figure and a naked woman, her head thrown back while a snake coiled around her arm noses its way toward the blushing apple of her breast. There is an inevitable suggestion here of the nude model as lifeless object; of sexuality, and humanity, arrested by objectification. The woman has a fleshy appeal, though her facial expression remains inanimate; she is a glassy Eve, whose crimson lips and coiffed hair belie her innocence.

And still, standing before the picture, one doesn’t feel anything as boorish as a straightforward condemnation of the “objectifying” gaze. Ms. Bessone’s paintings are too kitschy and sly to speak in a stern voice. The “Woman with Serpent” is, after all, a Meissen midget blown up to almost 8 feet tall and standing against a pink background that harmonizes, to humorous effect, with her pinkish skin.



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In fact, Ms. Bessone's tarts are more tartly satirical than they first appear. Just as "Woman with Serpent" pokes fun at the way men look at women, so "The Narcissist" (2007) holds a mirror up to women's desire to be seen. A seated nude in a classical, serpentine pose, shown fixing her hair, the narcissist's eyes remain closed to the outside world, and her gray-white skin — alabaster or porcelain — is bloodless.

Instead of sex, the flea-market troupe found in the downtown paintings offers campy theater. Here an 18th-century dandy is paired with a cutesy raccoon, while elsewhere cavort a mustachioed "Eunuch" (2008) in an orange turban; a rosy-cheeked, goatee-stroking "Faust" (2008) wearing a pink ruff, and "Butterfly" (2008), a Deco dancer in a stylized costume. And instead of satire, the mode downtown seems to be bizarre, even morbid humor, a humor that results from the fact that, in a sense, all of Ms. Bessone's downtown characters are travesties of artifice.

Her eunuch's thin, carefully shaped mustache contrasts with his full, rouged lips; his feminine face is mottled by a greenish tinge. And his lidded eyes seem to roll back in his head, perhaps because he's swooning from the burden of his mixed identity. The double portrait called "The Dandy and the Raccoon" (2007–8) mercilessly compares the preening Beau Brummell — in his fey slippers and high, arched hat — with the pert and overly adorable raccoon: He would be a male narcissist, if he didn't have the brain of a rodent. Unlike her cunning Faust, who seems to have stepped directly off a proscenium in the commedia dell'arte. A widow's peak headpiece emphasizing the arch of his brows, the smirk of his smile, as well as his icy blue eyes all contribute to a surface wickedness — an attitude applied like makeup. His ill bargain was made with the costume designer rather than the devil.

What saves these paintings from being, on the one hand, merely slick attempts to exploit our bottomless desire for kitsch and, on the other hand, rote and static exercises in allegory is the skill with which Ms. Bessone handles her pigments. The dry paint application transforms the glossy highlights — which, seen from afar, make the figures look convincingly glazed — into self-consciously abstract marks. Her shading and coloring, again with a relatively dry brush, mitigate against slickness and impart exactly the energies and liveliness the statuettes in real life would lack. Far from being travesties, Ms. Bessone's pictures are triumphs of artifice.