

Art in Review

By THE NEW YORK TIMES
May 25, 2007



At Mary Boone Gallery, portraits made on commission by the Italian painter Francesco Clemente.

Works, 1971-1979 *Deitch Projects 76 Grand Street, SoHo Through June 2*

Portraits *Mary Boone Gallery 541 West 24th Street, Chelsea Through June 30*

These exhibitions bracket the congenial career of Francesco Clemente, the most resilient of the Italian Neo-Expressionists who took New York by storm in the early 1980s. At Deitch Projects the Clemente of the 1970s, a young, restless proto-Neo-Expressionist, overcomes the gravitational pull of Post-Minimalism and especially Arte Povera. At Mary Boone he assumes the relatively recent guise of suave society portraitist working on commission, operating stylistically somewhere between David Hockney and Andy Warhol.

The rarely exhibited 68 works at Deitch show how figurative painting of the 1980s evolved from the nonfigurative nonpainting of the 1970s. These pieces begin in 1971, when Mr. Clemente was an architecture school dropout and dreamy doodler of 18 moving toward his signature concerns with the body, sexuality and self-portraiture. Made in Rome or India, the small, illumination-like ink drawings reflect the influence of Eastern art and thought and already evince a characteristic mood of self-contemplation, whether languorous or anxious.

There are glimpses of curled bodies, exaggerated faces and other motifs that would appear in Mr. Clemente's later oils and pastels. A 1971 drawing pieced together from several smaller sheets of paper shows a small, wiry man who eats, sleeps and has sex while nature encroaches. It's pure Clemente.

Less familiar are some Polaroid works from 1972 and '74 in which Mr. Clemente brushes past ideas that more mainstream postmodernists his age latched onto. In a larger photo-based work from 1976, he seems at pains to demonstrate the incompatibility of Arte Povera and erotic explicitness. This piece consists of an expert picture of a drawing (his) of two Classical-looking youths attempting acrobatic acts of onanism and a picture of an arrangement of pens, paper clips and other desktop items replicating their positions. It's just not the same.

Mr. Clemente gingerly approaches large scale in some 1978 gouaches whose Pop-Conceptual style evokes Ed Ruscha. The most beautiful consists of fields of small, finely rendered glasses of liquid, arranged by color on one side and randomly on the other.

The commissioned portraits at Boone lack the Deitch show's historical weight, but they may be more fun. Dating from 1999 to the present, they depict couples or individuals and were executed in single daylong sittings, or reclinings. (Most assume the position, alert yet horizontal, of the figures on Etruscan sarcophagi.) The Clemente-esque big faces, owlish eyes, levitating bodies and faceted forms, reminiscent of early modernism (various parts Chagall, Kokoschka and Beckmann), conspire to create an appealing fluffiness that shares qualities with superhip magazine illustrations and also Red Grooms. The images of couples benefit from elliptical canvases. In the best, the collectors Ray Learsy and Melva Bucksbaum float toward us, like mer-people in a large fishbowl.

In his catalog essay the critic Brooks Adams hits all the right notes: from Fayum portraits to David Levine. Quotations from Mr. Clemente suggest a certain disdain for his labors. Few portraits measure up to the one they are modeled on: a large painting of Mr. Clemente's wife from 1997, wearing red and posed in serpentine spiral, a standout in his 1999 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum. Tellingly, the two that do measure up also depict women in red. Intimacy is his ultimate subject.

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