

Art in America

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Studio Visit: Julie Heffernan

by [Perrin Drumm](#) 04/16/10

Julie Heffernan's figurative paintings are not easy to classify, perhaps because the nearly life-size portraits fall more or less in line with the style of the old masters: rich details, heavy symbolism and a composition that favors what she calls the "smack-in-the-middle female." Porcelain-skinned women clad in elaborate, make-believe gowns of pearls, flowers and heaps of dead animals wear elaborate headgear of sculpted hair or bundles of apples. Often times Heffernan's playful distortion of space makes it appear as if jumping flames or whole trees are growing out of her figures' heads. No matter their accoutrements, all of the subjects are dubbed self-portraits (even if they take the form of a house or an overgrown baby), and are painted in a color palette that bursts forth with the ripe reds of fruit or the luscious pinks and greens of her trademark fantasy landscapes.



PHOTO BY PERRIN DRUMM

The works are old-fashioned—that is, they use period details after a fashion, and as a conceptual device to trigger both the dissonant potential of Surrealism and awareness of the vast network of references and histories they invoke.

"There's just so much that our modern world doesn't offer that you only get in old paintings," says Heffernan, indicating that the references are meant to re-insert into the vocabulary of art what modernism has taken out, namely the lush worlds imagined by artists like Reubens and Velasquez.

One direct reference, which would be homage to the masters if it weren't also a matter of naturalism is the artist's use of chiaroscuro, rendering of light and shadow. What might look in her work like a return to the old masters is simultaneously a pointed rebellion against the prevailing modes of abstraction—minimalism and conceptualism—in the late 1970s and early 80s, when Heffernan was a student at Yale, a point at which, she says, "The complicated paintings I loved just weren't around."



Heffernan traces her approach to figure painting to her Catholic upbringing where she was exposed to little outside the realm of the Church: "I grew up looking at a picture of Jesus." With a visual language comprising heavily embellished Churches and portraits of Jesus and the saints (which she describes as "sensorially abundant cinematically explosions"), it's no wonder that the minimalist credo "less is more" doesn't apply here.

Her latest series, "Boy, Oh Boy," opening next week at PPOW marks at least one departure for the artist: no more smack-in-the-middle females. After years of working in the mode of Classical, centered portraiture "suddenly," she says, "I was just done with it." The figures that appear in "Boy, Oh Boy" not only deviate from their central location on the canvas but also from the female form. The subject here is a boy, her eldest son, who's getting ready to leave home and go off to college. Depicted as a dewy tree nymph holding balled-up forms of fruit and animals; wearing a utility belt equipped with all the advice a mother gives to her son when he leaves the nest (literally small renderings of her favorite paintings), he is a likely heir to the porcelain-skinned, redheaded women in the previous series of portraits. All of these new paintings focus on the act of moving on, whether it's her son literally moving away, or in an as-yet untitled painting that deals with the recent death of her mother. In this painting, small figures lug their worldly possessions behind them across a rope-bridge strung over a deep ravine.