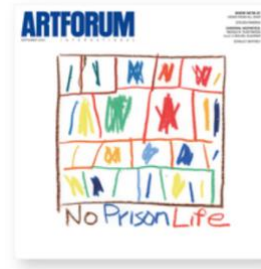


BROADWAY

ARTFORUM



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Adrienne Rubenstein, *Love Letter*, 2020, oil on panel, 35 x 23"

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Adrienne Rubenstein

DELI GALLERY | 110 WATERBURY STREET

I made a big mistake by walking through “Ruby in the Dust,” Adrienne Rubenstein’s exhibition at Brooklyn’s Deli Gallery, without a checklist in hand. Sure, I found plenty to enjoy in her ebullient, inventively composed oils—her painterly and coloristic gusto would probably have precursors such as Asger Jorn, George McNeil, or Don Van Vliet nodding in accord. But I “got” her works in another way when their titles clued me in to just how much humor is in them. Yes, I could see that the subject of that mostly pink-and-orange horizontal painting resembles a lumpy sofa, but it was quite something else to have it identified, more specifically, as her *Childhood Couch from Memory* (all works 2020). On an adjacent wall was a pileup of forms that might or might not have recalled a still-life arrangement of fruit. In the work’s upper-right corner was a golden cup with three straws—or worms, or spoons, or who knows what. Although it was titled *Cookbook Illustration*, to imagine it functioning as such was difficult . . . but hey, why not? And a many-fingered green form elsewhere initially reminded me of a candelabra. Yet finding out that it was a *Broccoli Menorah* made me see it in an entirely different light.

The rather dry, grungy surfaces of Rubenstein’s paintings rarely seem overworked, even though her mostly sharp palette can sometimes get muddy. The paintings also eschew an easy flow of the brush and the use of compositional formulas. One sensed that the resistance of the material is matched by the artist’s dogged determination to work things out while an idea is still fresh, along with her refusal of or indifference to facility that is rather unusual in a generation of painters who, like Rubenstein, are in their mid- to late thirties. Consider, for example, the paintings of Doron Langberg or Jennifer Packer—technical wizards both. What lifts Rubenstein’s art out of the ordinary is precisely the high-spirited humor that, as I’ve said, characterizes both her works and their titles. Although her images can border on the fantastical—take, for example, the goofy-looking green tentacled shape that for all I knew might have been some kind of Martian fungus but turned out instead to be a brassica holder of Hanukkah candles—the art is always rooted in some ordinary perception. “It’s funny how mundane memories come back to you over and over again,” she observed in the show’s press release-*cum*-statement of intent. Yet the faint resemblance her forms have to their original sources of inspiration may in itself be the best testimony to the inner image’s staying power; free association means more than resemblance.

Another way to put it would be to say that Rubenstein’s droll decompositions of the familiar transcend their own whimsy by dint of their commitment to what she calls “a kernel of truth, honesty, and curiosity in my intentions”—that is, to sincerity. Maybe that’s why one of my favorite pieces in the show had to be *Love Letter*—a heartfelt painting of a heart, something no one but Jim Dine is supposed to be able to pull off (and maybe not even Dine, now that he’s milked the motif dry). In one of the first exhibitions I was able to see in person by appointment, after months of lockdown, the painting felt like just what I needed—and not a minute too soon.

— Barry Schwabsky