

Paul Shank, Gaylen Gerber

BY David Bonetti

POST-DISPATCH VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

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Although it's easy enough to see stylistic, technical and intellectual development in the 30 paintings and works on paper by Paul Shank on view at the Philip Slein Gallery, what's remarkable is the consistency in the work he's produced during the past 45 years.

From the very first painting, a view of San Francisco's Embarcadero, painted in 1964, to the latest, a fantasy portrait of World War I-era Viennese novelist Robert Musil, a post-cubist concern with fragmented form is evident.

And in many works, that portrait of Musil among them, there is an abiding interest in painting the figure, not as a cipher to give scale, the "staffage" that art historians talk about, but as real people in unreal spaces.

Those two contrary motives sometimes get Shank in trouble. In many of the paintings, especially those from the 1980s, figure and ground exist separately but not equally. Because we tend to privilege images of our own species, the portraits dominate, turning the deconstruction of form into decoration.

Shank, who grew up and lives in St. Louis, isn't the only painter to have had such a problem. John Singer Sargent, for instance, painted portraits in a bravura update of the Grand Manner that went back to van Dyke and Gainsborough. But when he met Monet and the Impressionists, he sought to integrate their radical optical practice into his portraits. The two approaches never integrated and ended up looking like unresolved compromise.

Similarly, Picasso and Braque. It's hard to paint a fully integrated cubist portrait. Picasso figured out how, but Braque devoted himself to still lifes, which lend themselves to the post-Cezanne treatment of space. (Braque turned into the greatest still life painter of the 20th century. Go to the St. Louis Art Museum and look at his "The Blue Mandolin" from 1930 to see what I mean.)

Shank did something similar. In the mid-'80s he devoted himself to still life painting. Two gouaches from 1985 show the exploration of formal issues particularly well. Both "Still Life on Green Field" and "Still Life With Red Block" feature a wooden yoke with a generously curved element arranged with cubic forms against flat colored grounds, one yellow-green, the other red-orange. The curved shape plays with the orthogonal forms of the bars, cubes and other hard-edge forms on a fictive tabletop.

Shank could have made a career out of such exploration, playing with form and color in different scales and materials. But the figure drew him back.

The show ends impressively with three large paintings of figures from European literary history painted since 2006. All three of them, "Paul Nizan in Aden," "Ingeborg Bachmann in Rome" and "Robert Musil at Mahrish Weisskirchen" exhibit a mastery of technique and a renewed attempt at integrating the unfragmented figure within a turbulent, chaotic ground.

Maybe that's the point: that these three figures, all of whom lived in exile during turbulent times, maintained their integrity while the world around them collapsed.