

Retrospective is 20/20

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Paul Shank's demeanor is gentle and reserved and he seems nearly always to possess a subtle, somewhat beatific smile. Talking with him, however, one soon appreciates that for both the artist and his work there is a rigorous discipline, in both practice and contemplation. Despite the challenges to easy stylistic delineation which his work suggests, it is often formally conceived rather than purely intuitive and playful, with process always figuring centrally. It is this adherence to process which seems to provide the long filament of uninterrupted continuity in his art, and it is this same binding force which is revealed by the works currently featured in his retrospective, *Paul Shank, Paintings and Works on Paper: 1964-2008*, exhibited through April 25th at the Philip Slein Gallery.

Paul Shank's ability to resolve the presence of divergent stylistic influences often yields work with a uniquely and unexpectedly harmonious character. In *Café Flore* (1980) for example, the presumed subject is a young man passing a street side café. The piece utilizes a carefully employed color palette of browns, blues, and greens, while the composition balances the interplay of representation and the dynamics of collage. These elements are presented with such consistency of palette, and recurrence of form that the various fragments and images elide, and serve to provide both a larger compositional structure, as well as, to introduce a subtle emotional color. The abstracting tendency of these fragmented images, and introductions of collage, a visual theme which appears to

varying degrees throughout Shank's body of work, however, functions to specific effect in Café Flore. Here in particular these elements seem to lend themselves to depict the fractured, spontaneous nature of experience and the ability of memory to, in some sense co-opt its immediacy.

Blue Poles (1984) is another striking example of this conscription of representation to the ends of abstraction. In this case the subject is a still life, mostly the legs of stools, wood blocks and draped and folded paper. However, the composition is so festooned with colorful objects and interruptions in the certainty of continuous line that even the most structural components succumb to visual decomposition. In this piece too, Shank employs with particular success a technique which appears frequently in his work. To all of the frenetic visual structure already in place, he adds a number of torn and colored strips of paper, and expected though these shapes may be given the subject, they are laid suggestively upon the surface as trompe loeil, and with this singular complication the painting obtains further dimension and gains considerable complexity.

In pieces such as *Still Life with Block* (1979), a simple yet closely rendered still life and *Sognefjord* (1979), a moody landscape watercolor, one finds Paul Shank's ability to capture the uncomplicated in potent and rewarding ways. But it is most certainly with his large figurative work that one senses the artist happily immersed in the full measure of his process. In *Robert Musil at Märhrish Wiesskirchen* (2008) the novelist is depicted in his youth, dressed in the uniform of the military boarding school indicated in the painting's title, which ultimately served as the inspiration for his first novel, *Young*

Törless, and whose deconstructed architecture is depicted behind Musil with the rural farm fields which surrounded the school rolling dynamically and abstractedly above the scene. In this painting too, we see the artist playfully challenge the viewer with artifacts and colored fragments which at once describe and confuse the relationship between ground and surface. The painting becomes increasingly flat as the eye moves from what appears to be a scrap of painted canvas which floats in the foreground, while Musil himself is represented in fairly low contrast lighting, reminding one of the flat and faded image of a vintage photograph, while the sparsely drawn architecture compresses behind him and the fields finally lose any pretence to perspective. The result is a piece which is not easily or immediately penetrated, but which genuinely rewards close investigation and repeated experience.

Despite the relatively abstract nature of their settings, Shank has given considerable attention to sourcing authentic contexts for his series of author paintings. Exemplifying the depth of Shank's process and the blur which exists between painting and those things which are generative to it, Paul Shank, who owns nothing more technologically sophisticated than a stereo receiver, corresponded with various museum officials in Austria via missives tapped out on his vintage Olivetti and typing linen in order to obtain a tri-fold mailer containing one of the rare existing images of the actual academy from Musil's youth.

Concerning his treatment of figure, and by no means limited to his series of authors, it is interesting that by consistently describing the figurative subject as being so utterly free

from tension as he does, Shank wrests simple emotional resonance from them and projects them in effect, as he might any other object within a composition. Continually he thwarts these types of simple assumptions, crosses our sense of dimension by presenting artifacts which raise the question of surface, gives extensive screen time to landscape in what is ostensibly figurative, blends the abstract and the representational in ways that often defy easy distinction, treats the still life as landscape, and landscape as still life. His paintings seem to insist on being considered as objects in whole, rather than to be measured only by the emotive or representational transparency of their craftsmanship. One finds that this work is very much about the visual surface, it is painting which is unashamedly about painting, rather than seeking only to measure itself by its fidelity to feeling or concept. It is this facility, clarity of purpose, and unabated skill, which bring strength to this work and success to this retrospective.