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Paul Georges

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

through April 29

BY JOHN GOODRICH

At the heart of Paul Georges' paintings is a cheerfully contentious riddle. Many of his paintings from the last forty-plus years have had the epic imagery and dimensions of history painting, yet their technique can seem casual and peremptory. His narratives often suggest heroic sentiment, but their inelegant gestures (and sometimes goofy expressions) barely attempt to seduce the viewer. Even his most provocative renderings have about them a wry matter-of-factness, as if neither painter nor viewer were to take the whole affair quite seriously.

If so, it's a sign of a singular honesty—and also, for Georges, a productive working philosophy. Plenty of figurative painters over the last few decades have had cleverer images and more impressive technique, but not many have composed with as brave a gesture and forceful orchestration of colors. There's often a hit-and-miss aspect to Georges' exhibitions, but they always intrigue for their daring and quirkiness. In the best of these fifteen recent paintings at Salander-O'Reilly, Georges continues to catch more than a hint of the spirit of great painting.

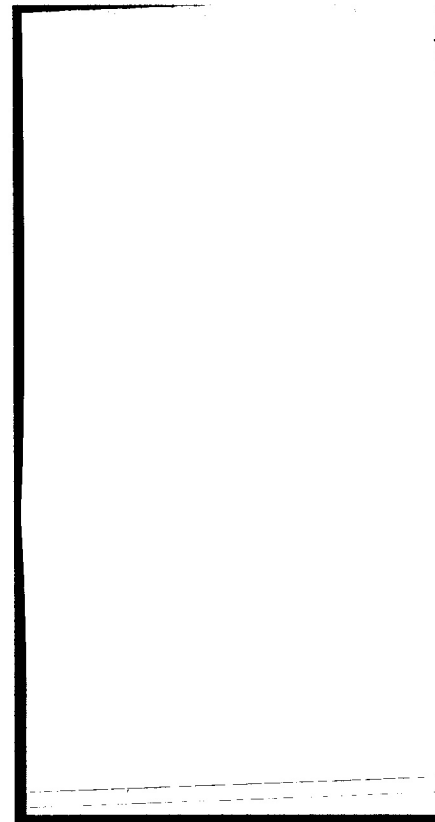
The most startling painting here is the immense *THE ANGEL PROTECTING THE ARTIST FROM BLINDNESS*, 1996/98, measuring over eleven by twelve-and-a-

half feet. Here, a huge red face crowds towards the artist's own standing figure, which, though life-size, seems vulnerably small on the huge canvas. An angel intervenes, her wings raised protectively around Georges' shoulders and head. (The macular degeneration that has threatened the 77-year old painter's eyesight in recent years has stabilized at present.)

Sentimental? Hardly; even for this highly personal story, George's stage door humor is apparent in the look of puzzled discomfort he paints on his own likeness. And more to the point, a coordination of colors and gestures give a potent immediacy to the composition. Great long wedges of green—variously lurid, or velvety deep, or evenly expansive—stream across the canvas' lower quarter, unfolding the vast space of pastures behind the figures' feet. The lowest wedge extends edge to edge and becomes the lever under the enormous red-and-black face climbing and spreading across the whole of the canvas' upper expanse. In a peculiar flourish, small, sketchy figures scramble darkly through the face's hair. Rising beneath, the angel's sienna skin tones are positively luminous next to the angry red.

In fact, the entire color sequence of the angel's and artist's figures is perfectly calibrated, so that even across leaps of temperature and tone, their broad gestures have a radiant gravity. Posed before the seas of green and red, Georges' figure incorporates areas of livid cerulean, a sallow yellow and a blackish viridian, but still reads as one discreet pillar, enveloped by the pressing ruddiness and brilliant white wings of the angel.

Some of Georges' perspective-defying devices, such as his rhymings of near and far objects and his upwardly diverging diagonals, are evident here, but the power of the image seems finally a result of intuition rather than



calculation. Not even the brusque rendering, the almost trite imagery and the self-mockery in the facial expression can neutralize the irreducible character of his colors and contours.

HOMAGE TO GREGORY'S YOUTH, 1999, a large studio scene of the artist working from a model, doesn't pack quite the same overall power, but here Georges depicts his own seated figure arching towards his canvas with moving intensity, while a delicious range of reds and browns describe the recesses of the studio behind.

Almost as large and far simpler are three paintings of massive rose bushes. The rhythms of *GLOBAL ROSES IN FULL BLOOM*, 1999, with its carmine masses paced by intervening greens, suggest the expansive, vibrant

turbulence of Action Painting, although here strips of deep sky above and white lilies below contain and quantify Georges' gestures.

Of several smaller still lifes, *PEWTER VASE BOUQUET*, 1997 is especially impressive. Its measured grays of floor and table surface lead the eye to a crowd of vases, flowers, fruit and other objects, each distinct but crammed on the tabletop as tightly as commuters on a No. 6 train at rush hour. Georges effortlessly indicates the complex depths between petals and leaves without disrupting larger rhythms. Beyond, the grays resume, carrying the eye eventually to a splash of green lawn outside a distant door. The measured dislocations between a trio of cool greens - the far lawn, the dirty green of a close-up wine bottle, the deep livid notes of a flower's leaves - is as good a key as any to the subtle orchestration going on here.

Also notable is *ANNIVERSARY*, 1998 in which a dozen gradations of purplish gray, haloed by intense pink circles, become vines of flowers, palpably backlit on an overhead arbor. *ARTICHOKE FLOWERS AND YELLOW WEEDS*, 1999 is wonderful for its satiny darks and austere energized design.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH MUSES, 1998, a large canvas of the artist painting several models in a geometricized space, places its ambient blues less convincingly, to my eye. (It makes an interesting statement, however, about the paradoxical commitment of three-dimensional scenes to the two-dimension surface.)

As in the artists' many previous exhibitions, these latest paintings suggest the painter's unshakable confidence in the mystery of painting, and his determination to unlock bits of it in his own work. The results can be messy, in both technique and imagery.

Georges' motives, though, are oddly immaculate. For the fashion

conscious, the disregard for the niceties of representation might be a pose, a display of *haute couture*, but Georges is the real thing: an artist genuinely indifferent to stylishness. Could it be the symptom of an abiding, chastening reverence for the old masters rather than in contemporary prospects for painting?

Georges dives into the ever more-muddied reservoir of tradition, mucks about and frequently pulls out original, rough-hewn gems. He puts conviction ahead of taste, which is refreshing, when the reverse is so often the case these days.

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