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Margaret Curtis, *Float of the Peephole* (detail), 1997, gouache and ink on rice paper, 15 1/2 x 13"

MARGARET CURTIS ARENA

Margaret Curtis may be one of the most marginal young painters around. Although she first came to many viewers' notice in the 1993 "Bad Girls" show at the New Museum, her stock-in-trade has less to do with willful transgression than with sheer uncontainability. So it comes as no surprise that her works on paper are far from the carefully rendered notational style that has become the lingua franca for an entire artist tribe.

The earlier drawings in her recent exhibition, from 1992 to 1994, had not yet attained the headiness of those done

1995. Technically, the latter are rendered with such joyfully fractious precision, unexpectedly married to an admirably improvisational looseness, that I'd imagine fellow practitioners would find them humbling: looking at them, you'd feel like either a stoach or a drudge by comparison.

Curtis is drawn to fractious yet pungent allegories that combine of a curious mix of the in-your-face obvious and the hermeneutically allusive. Among her more striking conceptions, here as in the 1996 painting exhibition "Kairy Matters," is a series of what she calls "floats," essentially monster trucks that barrel through otherwise nebulous pictorial space on impossibly large wide-tread tires, loaded down with all manner of symbolic regalia. The exact connections between, or meaning of, the heaping cargo of the floats is not always clear, and strong whiffs of satire get diffused amidst the antiquities. Curtis' feminis: puppet, nevertheless—consciously assured, yet psychologically edgy—is never in doubt: in works entitled *Float of the Peephole* or *Mr Open Float*, both 1997.

I suspect that Curtis' ambiguities are the result of her particular take on allegory. The allegorical method itself, with its insurrection of accumulation and ruin, appeals to her even more than the delicious burden of meaning it conveys. Her wayward artistic heritage reveals itself most notably in *Abandoned Female Form*, 1997, in which she declares her allegiance to Giorgio de Chirico—and not to his widely regarded early period, with its brooding architectural voids, so much as to the delectable object, endemingly sized pseudoclassical paintings of his dotage. In this drawing, a sort of semi-automaton scarecrow, whose partly exposed armature pointedly resembles a wrecked painter's stretcher, supports a motley covering of *voluptas* and *wharrit*. (Is that bunched netted stuff lacework or chicken wire? This volaruous monstrosity reigns like a dainty garter over a vague landscape.)

Curtis pursues the theme of the image deconstructing to reveal an underlying structure in other recent drawings such as *Sign from Behind me: Elucidated*, both 1997. These suggest an equal disdain for the realist's faith in appearances and the abstractionist's search for deeper reality. Each as ramshackle as the other, only their parodic and drill confrontations supply sufficient entertainment for Curtis' mercurially morose eye.

—Rory Schatzberg



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