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ART REVIEWS; Sensuous Imagery With Social Commentary

By HELEN A. HARRISON

'Margaret Curtis Paintings'

Annie A. Wallace Gallery, Campus Center, State University of New York at Old Westbury, (516) 876-3056. Through March 10.

Surveying some eight years of Ms. Curtis's work, this show illustrates her progress from the persona she established as part of the New Museum's "Bad Girl" exhibition in the early 1990's to her current preoccupation with the symbolism of American abundance and consumption.

Ms. Curtis repeatedly refers back to the tantalizing sensuality of Baroque art and the visual vocabulary of Romanticism, with its strong emotional content and inherent narrative. Voluptuous paint handling, coupled with charming images, draws the viewer into a rebus-like tangle of conflicting meanings.

In early works like the 1993 canvases "Yearning Wheel" and "May Day," the paint has a cake-icing quality that clashes with imagery suggesting isolation and dislocation. Pictures of confectionery goodies coexist with those of body parts and decaying relics in a realm where desire and entropy vie for dominance.

Ms. Curtis's recent paintings are even more explicit in their blending of sensuous appeal and commentary on transience, decay and material excess. Everything is over-ripe and on the verge of collapse, as in "Abandoned Female Form," where a gaily decorated body seems to decompose before one's eyes. No amount of cosmetic enhancement can arrest the ravages of time and the elements.

The superficiality of glamour is manifested in "Sign From Behind," a tattered icon blasted by weather. Gravity takes its inexorable toll in "Earth," an overloaded sandwich of organic components that compresses under its own weight.



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