

IDA APPLEBROOG: NOTHING PERSONAL, PAINTINGS 1987-1997

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Conceived without plot, seemingly fragmented and disconnected situations appear-some with explanation-some without. But actually all the stories are the same story...repetitions of images-like freezing a memory.

Ida Applebroog's one-woman show, "Nothing Personal, Paintings 1987-1997," dominates the upper level of the Corcoran Gallery of Art until June 1. She describes her work as "a series of Rorschach tests," open to different interpretations by different viewers. Her large-scale oil paintings alternately horrify, amuse, and disturb her audiences.

The paintings depict people, usually women or children, in uncertain situations. She does not provide convenient beginnings or ends to her ambiguous narratives, but rather leaves viewers with a vague sense of dread. Applebroog's signature pieces consist of cartoonlike outlined figures. They would be cute or funny, with their dot eyes and mouths, if they were not so expressionless, so casual as they enact violent or disturbing scenes. The horror lies in what could be hiding behind their naive faces. Could that same potential for violence be buried underneath everyone's facade of comfortable ordinariness?

He started whistling an aria from "Madame Butterfly."

In the twelve-minute video "Belladonna," which Applebroog made with her daughter, filmmaker Beth B, various characters' narratives overlap and interrupt each other. Seemingly meaningless phrases repeat and echo throughout the film. Although the viewer tries to piece together narratives, none of the stories coalesce until the end. This same repetition appears in Applebroog's paintings, but the stories never come into focus.

I am human you pig. He didn't hurt anyone else that day. I'm not a bad person.

The artist's early work is represented by "Illuminated Manuscripts," a 1977 series of small drawings done in Rhoplex and ink on vellum. While illuminated manuscripts helped explain stories to the illiterate public in medieval times, Applebroog's are intended to confuse the thoughtful, literate viewer.

I threw it away. He threw her to the ground.

Applebroog composes her wall-sized paintings out of smaller canvases attached together, sometimes bending them to project out from the wall, sometimes leaving gaps in the middle of compositions. The edges do not usually line up exactly, reflecting the idea that life is not as orderly as we would like it to be. Alternately applying color in thin washes and thick scraped clots, Applebroog renders her figures deliberately. She knows exactly what she wants to present. It is our job to put clues together and figure out what that is.

In "orgiastic/romantic plastic," from the "Pun Paintings" series of 1990-91, a flock of turkeys waddle quickly across the foreground past a man in a cape and an overweight man attempting to walk an

invisible tightrope. Repeating panels across the top portray two men in business suits covering their eyes. Another man sits fishing out of a pail. Outlined in white on a pastel teal background, a man grabs a woman and holds a gun to her head. Viewers are shocked and confused. Why is this happening? What does it mean?

I loved her very much.

Applebroog revisited the "Marginalia" series of freestanding paintings, begun in 1991-92, in 1996. However, in the recent paintings she switches from neutral raw umber paint to intense alizarin, the color of blood. Walking into this part of the gallery, the viewer cannot escape from the stares of these garishly painted figures. Boys stand awkwardly in their underwear; a man touches himself; a woman in high heels hangs from a noose, the paint thick like clotted blood.

Use a magnificent vocabulary with great casualness.

Throughout this collection of work, Applebroog plants blatantly and subtly sexual images. Sometimes their actions look genuine; sometimes there are hints of danger. People stand around in their underwear looking uncomfortable. Men undress women expressionlessly. A pervading sense of the lack of love and security in human relationships hovers over the images like a sinister fog.

In the "Living" series of 1994-96, the artist parodies the frivolity of people like Martha Stewart. She painted decorative objects like flower arrangements and Jell-o molds in the foregrounds of these works and obscured scenes of people forming visual puzzles in the centers. Characters from previous paintings make cameo appearances. As in the video "Belladonna," we try to organize these snapshot images into readable narratives, but we have to content ourselves with vague feelings. Emblazoned on the sides are sarcastic projects for this month: "Change God's phone number," "Redecorate murder asylum," "Plan cure for ugliness," "Design aprons for nuthouse." She suggests that real human relationships are obscured by our images of what we think perfect lives should be like.

Insight bores me. Plan cure for ugliness.

The "Tattle Tales" series of 1993-94 presents a horrific view of the world as a place full of violent nightmares. People are presented headless, blindfolded, or with animal heads. In "I'm rubber, you're glue," an army fires on an unseen enemy, a priest rubs his eyes in weariness, and a man hammers a nail into his own face, suggesting that we cannot escape the consequences of our divisive actions against others. "Jingle bells, shotgun shells" depicts a wasteland as the aftermath of widespread violence and illness.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel," 1990, plays off of the traditional version of the fairy tale by providing a large ladder in the foreground. So Rapunzel could climb down if she wanted to-if she isn't cowering in her imprisonment like the small, repeated female figure in the lower half of the painting. Real women's faces peer out of the blurry tower windows while hula dancers with palm leaves on their heads pose like the models on "The Price Is Right." Applebroog implies that women's real personalities are imprisoned by popular culture characters and archetypes.

He started whistling an aria from "Madame Butterfly."

Amidst the violence and seeming despair of Applebroog's work are hints of hope. In "Lohengrin/bacitracin," 1990, a woman stands staunchly against a wall into which daggers have been thrown a la William Tell. This may be a sort of self-portrait of the artist. The woman has come through danger unscathed and unafraid of death. Similarly, a woman in one of the "Marginalia" paintings sweeps

away goblins with chicken bodies and human heads, figuratively banishing her fears.

I'm not a bad person.

I left the show in a strange frame of mind. As I walked down the street, I found myself looking more closely than usual at the people I passed. What were they thinking? Did their faces conceal hidden stories like the layered, muddled images in Applebroog's paintings?

Repetitions of images-like freezing a memory.