The Solo Show as Group Portrait:

David Klamen,s Multifarious Paintings

On first view, an exhibition by David Klamen looks like a group show. Depending upon the particularities of the installation, there appears to be works by as many as six artists present: 1.) a Realist, whose interiors and exteriors revive Photo-Realism by way of classic film noir and contemporary fashion, design, and architectural magazines; 2.) a Romantic, whose untrammeled landscapes are marked by the signs of Symbolism or the symbols of science, both of which are filtered through Minimalism,s reductive geometry; 3.) a Miniaturist, who often packs more than 100 abstract landscapes onto a single sheet of watercolor paper and still leaves plenty of room for the imagination to roam freely; 4.) an Intimist, who arranges similar salon-style configurations of modestly scaled paintings on large walls; 5.) a Postmodern Stripe-Painter, whose offbeat bands of alternating color voraciously translate the Old Masters and Internet porn into a system that recalls bar codes and the Op Art of Bridget Riley and Julian Stynczak; and, 6.) a lowbrow Pointillist, whose indelicate, innumerable dots blot out handsomely painted representational scenes as they record the meditative activity of repetitive Buddhist chanting (or "daimoku").

On second look, it becomes clear that a Klamen exhibition is not group show. For one thing, there,s not a curator out there who could bring together such a felicitous arrangement of wide-ranging paintings that made so much visual sense while looking so distinct. For another, Klamen,s various bodies of work overlap and complement one another so harmoniously and with such integrity of purpose that they reflect too coherent, sustained, and organic an argument to be made by six different painters. As an artist, Klamen is a master of the double-take ˆ that startled, sometimes jarring, and often emotionally loaded experience of snapping one,s gaze back at something you have just seen because something about it suggests that it,s anything but routine. Getting visitors to look ˆ and look again (and again) ˆ is the Chicago-based painter,s speciality, and it marks the moment when his abstract images begin to do their most compelling work: setting us to thinking not just about the pictures before our eyes, but pondering our own abilities to know what we,re seeing, and what that means for us as social beings ˆ especially when we stop taking such activities for granted.

Comprised of objects that embody a sharply focused set of intentions while demonstrating impressive, often virtuoso painterly facility, a Klamen exhibition is an event that is open to a potentially infinite range of interpretations. The artist,s arrangements of paintings not only invite viewers to ask big epistemological questions, like "How do we know what we know?", but to explore the parameters of our answers by grounding them in the physical facts of experience, which is always incomplete, shaded by past events, and shaped by whatever perspective an individual happens to be under the influence of. By presenting a heady blend of curiosity and doubt, Klamen,s constellations of styles, subjects, and strategies steer clear of both certainty and cynicism. In our unsubtle, all-or-nothing world, in which over-simplified sound-bites consistently win out over the messy complexities of big-picture views, Klamen,s multilayered art occupies an uncompromised ˆ and uncompromising ˆ middle ground. Allowing doubt and conviction to be present in the same thoughts, his ambitiously uncategorizable oeuvre makes a virtue of ambiguity ˆ and makes human experience all the richer for it.

The Realist strand that runs through all of his works is most vividly realized in a series of large oils on linen that depicts the entrances to museums and university departments of theology or philosophy. Strange things happen in these precisely ruled and fastidiously varnished renditions of neo-Classical buildings and proto-Modernist interiors. Most of Klamen,s dark, shadow-shrouded pictures resemble photographic negatives or impossibly large daguerreotypes. They require some time for one,s eyes to adjust to their nighttime palettes. This experience recalls that of stepping out of the midday sun and into a darkened theater, not to mention what it,s like to read the story of Plato,s cave, where visitors must first squint before coming to understand the philosopher,s point about the untrustworthy elusiveness of solid objects and the stability and perfection ideal forms. In either case, the bright light of reason, which should enhance the mathematical accuracy and rational clarity of Klamen,s images, instead looks ghostly. It emanates, impossibly, from floors so polished they appear to dissolve into illusionistic nothingness. The cold light also casts shadows so warm and velvety that they are as attractive and welcoming as the parts of the pictures that can be seen clearly.

In this ongoing series, Klamen turns the tables on conventional wisdom without eliminating the

patience, discipline, and hard work on which such knowledge is based. He reinforces this reversal by infusing it with a light touch of humor. Paintings, everyone knows, are supposed to go in museums. Rather than waiting for that to happen, Klamen puts museums (and other cultural repositories of beauty and truth) in his paintings. His highly self-conscious pictures simultaneously cast a long shadow over the virtual world of digital technology (particularly the architectural software whose look they transcend); fashion and design magazines (whose sleekly stylized reproductions they outdistance); and contemporary photography (by such artists as James Casebere and Thomas Demand, both of whom embrace similar forms of artifice, illusion, and mystery). As for painting, Klamen,s impeccable surfaces and pristine structures can be seen as the noirish counterpart to Kevin Appel,s light-as-a-cloud paintings of mid-century modernist architecture in sunny Southern California. Both use buildings as metaphors, examining what they disclose and withhold, expose and bury. Something sexy and sinister lurks beneath the surfaces of Klamen,s works, whose silence is so strong it isn,t difficult to imagine hearing a pin drop in them, its echoes reverberating around the columns, arches, and halls. Although no living creatures stir in any of them, they are profoundly anticipatory or effective in their capacity to generate suspense. The exquisite sense of isolated aloneness that is palpable in Klamen,s paintings does not suggest the dread of being the last person left on Earth; it evokes, on the contrary, the even creepier sense of not being alone, of some unknown company hiding in the shadows.

The Romantic strand in Klamen,s art comes to the forefront in his twilight landscapes. In these large works on linen and small works on paper, unpopulated expanses of Earth and sky feature small clusters of leafy trees, sometimes as few as three and rarely more than a dozen. These works are as significant for what they depict as for what they leave out. Their carefully cropped compositions and dimly lighted palettes make each seem expansive, as if what we,re seeing is a large swathe of countryside. But to look closely is too see that Klamen,s serene scenes are not set far off in the woods, in some Edenic world of unsullied nature. In fact, it,s more likely that each is an urban park, easily accessible by car and not far from modern civilization,s uglier structures, including convenience stores, electric lines, housing developments, and highways. So strong is our desire to see Nature in Painting ˆ and so reinforced by habit and convention ˆ that we overlook details to escape, as quickly as possible, into this tried-and-true fantasy. As a painter, Klamen is in no way opposed to such pleasures, he simply wants viewers to be aware of its workings. He is, after all, a consummate craftsman and convincing illusionist. But he interrupts each seamless illusion with a set of stark white lines set at right angles. These horizontal and vertical elements block viewers from completely entering the picture. They prevent us from forgetting where we are actually standing. Each linear element, it turns out, is a handmade map that records the streets on which Klamen made rights and lefts to get to the parks he has pictured, which stand in for memories as much as the real thing. Philosophy enters this group of works surreptitiously. Playfully turning a bit of folk wisdom around on itself, Klamen suggests that the inability to see the trees for the forest aptly captures the spirit of an Aristotelean critique of Platonic Idealism, which can be summarized as "true knowledge is based on the little things you experience firsthand, not on abstract ideals that can never be seen."

Formal attributes link the Miniaturist and the Intimist in Klamen,s well-rounded oeuvre. Despite the structural similarities between his tiny watercolors painted on single pages of paper and his clusters of paintings arranged on single walls, each of these bodies of work articulates a distinct facet of his art.

With the directness of Rorschach-blots, the micro-watercolors scrutinize the relationship between intention and happenstance, as well as the human tendency to see familiar things in strange shapes. Klamen makes each of his postage stamp-size paintings in a few seconds. Wetting the paper and laying down two or three brushstrokes, he lets chemistry and physics do the rest. The pigments disperse, the water dries, and, as if by magic, landscapes appear, complete with fog-shrouded trees, misty lakes, distant mountains, and all manner of pretty vistas under clear and cloudy skies and ravishing sunsets. The more little windows that Klamen puts on a page, the more convinced viewers are of the accuracy and vividness of each mini-picture. This reveals that repetition and habit shape not only *how* we see, but *what* we see. Unlike some over-eager artists, Klamen does not make the illogical next step and insist that there,s a better, less subjective way to comprehend the world. He simply demands that we pay close attention to the machinations of the process.

Something similar transpires in his multi-panel installations, which explore, more than any of Klamen,s other works, the inner world of subjectivity. In this series, reverie, intuition, and dreaminess take precedence over the rational mind. A good number of these paintings have had their surfaces scraped

down and sanded. Some have been partially repainted. Others are left bare, as if they have endured years of harsh weather. Still others include fragments of language, indecipherable diagrams, thick smears of paint, or realistically rendered objects adrift in fields that do not seem to be continuous with them. Klamen describes most of these pieces as being based on impressions or observations that don,t seem worthy of being the subject of serious paintings. But as a group, such dismissible incidents and curious catches in consciousness add up to wholes far greater than the sum of their parts. That,s because Klamen,s wall-size installations follow a logic that is distinct from that of his miniaturist pictures. Rather than repeating a set of gestures to create an increasingly convincing illusion of the visible world, these works poke and prod in various directions, only hinting at emotions and sentiments because they are invisible, but no less potent.

Like Klamen,s miniature landscapes and intimate abstractions, his irregular stripe paintings and odd pointillist pieces look out to the external world and into an inner one. But they go further in blurring the boundaries between the two.

His graphic stripe paintings put a wicked spin on a recent and generally well-manner trend in painting by turning its format into a voracious machine that is ruthlessly indiscriminate in its ability to chew up and spit out all sorts of images, from masterpieces like Caravaggio,s "Doubting Thomas" and Poussin,s "Adoration of the Golden Calf" to smut from Internet porn sites and Larry Flynt,s "Hustler." Klamen filters images that rivet a viewer,s attention ˆ for whatever reason ˆ through a digital program to give his paintings the appearance of the bar codes that are used by corporate retailers all over the globe. The artist, however, is not interested in exactly duplicating the information-processing efficiency of such electronic systems. Instead, he uses it as a model against which to compare and contrast the ways viewers scan paintings ˆ "reading" their salient signs to pick up the essential info as quickly as possible. Klamen,s hand-painted bands beat viewers at this game by compressing and condensing even more subtlety into either-or choices. Paradoxically, his do-it-yourself rendition of two-tone pixellation slows down viewers, forcing us to struggle as we piece together the brutally abbreviated pictures we,re familiar with. As in life, the glitches or inconsistencies prove to be the most captivating sections of Klamen,s paintings. These trippy places suggest volume, rather than flatness, and lure a viewer,s memory into action. Like fading echoes of the real world, these idiosyncratic stripe paintings embody a sort of computer-age ghostliness that complements the pristine, virtual worlds presented in Klamen,s Realist paintings.

For their part, Klamen,s dot paintings begin the same way his Realist ones do: as faithful representations of the external world. They depict Lake Michigan,s horizon as it,s seen through the artist,s apartment window. But Klamen applies countless dabs of white paint to his predominantly blue paintings, each touch of his brush indicating he has chanted the refrain used by Daimoku Buddhists to meditate their way to enlightenment. As Klamen gets more deeply into the rhythm of his meditation, or just spends more time going through its motions, the external world,s appearance is increasingly obscured by a veil of white flecks. The illusory veil of material reality doesn,t disappear so much as it,s re-constituted as a lumpy dot painting. For viewers, it,s still possible to make out the original image, but it,s impossible to look at the dots and the picture simultaneously. Two paintings occupy one plane. The relationship between them may be arbitrary, even accidental, but it still makes visual or poetic sense. The Modernist mantra, "Less is more" takes on added resonance, especially when you learn that Klamen lives in a Mies van der Rohe building.

A generous, look-for-yourself openness animates all of Klamen,s paintings. In his multi-part, mix-and-match installations, hard-and-fast distinctions between Realism and Romanticism dissolve, as do the ordinarily fixed boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity, abstraction and representation, intention and accident, high and low, East and West, past and present. As a whole, his art abandons the monotheism on which much modern art-making is based for the polytheism of the ancient Greeks. Klamen,s oeuvre pluralizes the phrase "god-like creativity," transforming a fundamental component of modern art in the West into an ad hoc collaboration among contradictory figures, whose comic squabbles and tragic disagreements often result in down-to-earth wisdom for those of us who observe them. In Klamen,s hands, the self and whatever it isn,t take off on trips with no end in sight but satisfactions all around.

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