

Elyse Harrison: **POOLS IN MUSEUMS**

If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water –Loren Eiseley

This exhibit of Elyse Harrison's recent series of paintings follows her successful participation in Communicating Vessels, a three-person show at the American University Museum in early 2020. The title of that show was borrowed from that of a book written in 1932 by Surrealist poet and founder André Breton who, in turn, had borrowed it from a scientific experiment of the same name. For Breton, the phrase refers to the artist, whether literary or visual, whose work results from communication between the inner life of the mind, emotions and dreams, and the waking perception of the exterior world. Over the past century, the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 30s has had an enduring influence on all the arts, and is enjoying renewed importance in the current moment.

Harrison's Pools in Museums shows that interest in her incongruous concept of placing art in fictitious museums where visitors would wade slowly through pools of water to access it. While the idea may sound unpleasant, the artist's presentation of it in these works suggests an experience of a different sort. Their abstracted representation of the art works in the "museum" setting, and their bright colors conjure an impression of contentment, despite the strangeness of the situation. Indeed, they seem to embody the material of dreams and the way that often the strangest elements in them can be perceived by the dreamer as comforting or soothing rather than menacing. Harrison's use of "dream material" as fundamental to her work has a long history—this was the title of a show of her work in 2004 at her then Gallery Neptune in Bethesda—but the sophistication and the implied polyvalence of her recent work has brought it to a new level. As the artist has herself written, "the results are beguilingly simple, an easy gateway for the more complex psychological themes that stir beneath the surfaces of my work."

Harrison spends a lot of time looking at water, particularly at water in man-made pools. She was first intrigued by them while in California in the summer of 2016. For her, the feeling of being in or near water in a contained shape was “consistently transformative and comforting”. The result was a series of small format Pool Paintings (2017) where the often organic shapes of the pools contain the abstracted pattern of the constant motion of the water and its color. These may be considered the precursors of the current series. While the water in the latter, contained only by the edges of the canvas, can be seen as a barrier to accessing the art shown in differing relation to it, the feeling in most of them is calm, even inviting.

Water has many levels of symbolic reference. Freud spoke of the “oceanic feeling” where, in the water, one feels a sense of boundlessness, a “sensation of eternity”. Although Freud’s further interpretation of this was reductive, Jung saw pools of water in dreams as symbols of the unconscious. By juxtaposing this reference to the primitive depths of the unconscious mind with the perception of carefully rendered works of art in imaginary museums, a simultaneous expression of conscious and unconscious experience results. This is Harrison’s brilliant surrealist strategy with these works. They call the viewer to go past the beautifully patterned surface and contemplate their deeper implications.

Four of the paintings in the series, #s 2, 3, 4 and 5, show a corner wall with the art on its panels. Of them, Speak Silence (#4) is the darkest and the largest. Three abstracted faces appear in side views. Two have mouths open, as though desperately willing words to come. The center one, with her eye and mouth closed, is silent. The water here is black, with white wave patterns reaching the baseboard. Its color is threatening--one can’t gauge the depth of black water. As the series progressed, the compositions became more complex with changing perspectives in relation to the picture plane. #s 6 and 7 show the art, which appears three dimensional, on curved platforms almost like stages. The “sculptures” in #7 seem like performers in choreographic positions, but the water appears to further isolate them from an assumed

audience. The most recent, #10, is something of a conceptual departure. Above the water of the pool a huge dog lies on a tiled floor, eyes open. His expression is contemplative. Resting on his upraised paws is a bed with a protective arch on which a woman rests, eyes closed. The entire background is painted as though the water rises up around the figures, especially under the arch, suggesting their full immersion into it. Perhaps this represents the woman's gentle dream. It's up to each viewer to decide.

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