

Art in America

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Alexi Worth: *Lenscap*, 2006, oil on canvas, 24 by 26 inches; at DC Moore.



Alexi Worth at DC Moore

If photography and painting have become a middle-aged couple, the accumulated tensions within their relationship count as good theater for Alexi Worth. His new, modestly scaled, emphatically handmade paintings don't mimic the appearance of photographs or use photomechanical tools, as does work by armies of modern and contemporary artists. Instead, they address the relationship thematically, with a personally stylized realism. Worth weaves a consideration of lenses, reflections and the desire to capture an image into his psychosocial subject matter, which concerns people and their need for contact with others.

The black disk pictured in *Lenscap* (all paintings 2006) nearly fills the picture, leaving just enough space to show the five oversize fingers that hold it, and, peeking through from the background, a much smaller hand pulling an apple from a tree. It turns out to belong to Eve, copied from Titian's painting *Adam and Eve* (1550); she is shown committing the first crime while also providing a delicious metaphor for Worth's musings on vision, blindness and intersubjectivity. The lens cap occludes most of the image field, but the thin coat of black paint used to represent it reveals, more than any other part of the painting, the rugged tooth of the canvas. Worth's lens cap indicates the painting's point of view to be that of a camera while also spotlighting the work's character as a handmade material object.

Whenever an object or person blocks our view in a Worth painting, something thematically important is revealed; often it's about us, the Spectator. Many paintings in the exhibition, titled "Couples," feature shadows as protagonists. *Rag and Palette* shows an artist seen from behind, casting a shadow across the face of his painted female subject. The two figures are closely enough aligned to suggest a hybrid person, a fusion of depicter and depicted, even as they face in opposite directions. Worth casts the Pygmalion story, in the complicated lights of psychotherapy and feminism, as an ambiguous power dynamic. *Model in Shadow* and *Head and Shoulders* each pictures a seated woman with the shadow of an off-frame man thrown across her. The shadow equates the spectator with the painter in his studio, standing before both the painting and its distracted female subject. In

these works Worth spins a variation on Pliny the Elder's well-known account of the invention of painting, in which a young woman traces the shadow of her departing beloved. This origin story joins representation and proto-photography, icon and index, with the glue of desire, understood as the incompatible impulses of longing and possession. Worth's paintings playfully invoke these themes while finding ingenious ways to visually scramble the distinctions between people. In *Double Sip* a person raising a wine glass in front of his or her face is seen from the point of view of someone doing the same. The lenslike distortions of glass and liquid make a patterned swirl of pressing fingers and shadows into an image of the wish for connection. Cheers! —David Humphrey