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Review: Roger Brown, ‘Political Paintings’ and ‘Virtual Still Life’

By KEN JOHNSON JULY 2, 2015

Roger Brown (1941-1997) was one of the best of the Chicago Imagists who emerged in the 1960s. In a cartoon style reminiscent of the comics and graphic design of the 1930s and '40s, he painted city and rural scenes populated by tiny, silhouetted figures of people, under glowing skies filled with puffy clouds in gridded patterns.

Two terrific exhibitions reveal different sides of his creative sensibility: the skeptical, often cranky observer of contemporary affairs in “Political Paintings,” at DC Moore, and the romantic formalist in “Virtual Still Life,” at Maccarone.



Roger Brown’s “Gulf War” (1991), a diptych, is part of his new show, “Political Paintings,” at the DC Moore Gallery. DC Moore Gallery, New York

The paintings at DC Moore address topics like money, war and terrorism. “Government

Smokescreen” (1990) mimics a carnival banner. Below a yellow ribbon bearing the words “\$aving\$ and Loan,” a huge American flag hangs vertically between columns of a neo-Classical bank. One of five alarmed people arrayed before it is setting fire to a lower corner of the flag, presumably to protest the financial scandals of the 1980s.

“Gulf War” (1991) is a diptych pairing mock-heroic portraits of former President George H. W. Bush and Saddam Hussein. The men loom gigantically over desert landscapes with helicopters buzzing around their heads. It suggests that as makers of war, these leaders were kindred spirits.

The 11 works at Maccarone belong to a series Mr. Brown produced in the mid-1990s. Each features a luminous, pastoral landscape sparsely dotted by Lilliputian figures. Each also has a shelf jutting out from the bottom of the canvas, on which cups, vases, ashtrays and other ceramics are displayed, as if on a windowsill. There’s a surprising sense of harmony between the physically here-and-now and the further reaches of imaginative vision in these beautiful works.

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