



ART REVIEW - Once More with Feeling: Neo-X Returns with Genieve Figgis

July 29, 2014

by James Croak

A great destination for Hamptons art lovers is the first American show of Genieve Figgis in East Hampton, N.Y. The Dublin-based artist's neo-Expressionist paintings are installed at Harper's Books in the exhibition "Genieve Figgis: Yes Captain" on view through Aug. 6, 2014.

[Neo-Expressionism](#), aka Neo-X, was the 1980s emotive backlash to two decades of subjectivity denial and general devaluation of painting by the late modernists of the '60s and '70s. In the forefront were Americans [Julian Schnabel](#) and [Eric Fischl](#) and the Italian three C's as they are known: [Francesco Clemente](#), [Sandro Chia](#) and [Enzo Cucchi](#).

The latter three marketed themselves with the catchy "[transavantgarde](#)" title, which worked for a time until the art world caught on that the term they coined really had no meaning. The work was generally regarded as European art reasserting its hegemony over the American pop art and conceptualism that had dominated the scene for decades.

It was a guys' party and women often complained they were not invited. It was a complaint with merit: the 1981 "New Spirit in Painting" exhibition in London included 38 male painters but no women. One could not imagine this kind of imbalance today, especially with Figgis around.

Genieve Figgis is now in her 40s and quite developed as a painter, as evidenced by the 32 paintings on display in the lobby and second floor of the popular East Hampton bookseller. The work is an extended bawdy theater set of anxious individuals in Baroque costumes behaving uproariously, as in the chair assignation by a courtly couple in the exhibition's title piece, *Yes Captain*. Much of it seems designed to skewer the English aristocracy of the 17th and 18th centuries as only a native of the Emerald Isle could do.



"Yes, Captain" by Genieve Figgis, 2014. Oil on panel, 10 x 12 inches.

And therein lies the problem from an American point of view: Figgis has to identify her targets from books and other sources, since she obviously wasn't living 250 years ago. Granted, older buildings and interiors still grace the architecture of Europe, but the rest comes from paintings of the time. She is not painting real life in front of her, as pop or conceptual artists do; she is painting her

fantasy of what another time was like.



“Gentleman Caller” by Genieve Figgis, 2014. Oil on wood panel, 15 x 12 inches.

There is a rich European history of artists doing exactly this: portraying the grotesque as it existed in earlier times when they weren’t around. Federico Fellini’s 1969 film “[Satyricon](#)” comes to mind, with the sordid and at the same time madcap hilarity tinged with desperation set in Nero’s court in the 1st century CE. Many of Figgis’s paintings would fit perfectly as stage sketches for such a movie.

Many of the paintings are distorted to the point of abstraction, which is a nice addition to the artist’s developed figuration. This is where abstract expressionism came from anyway, and here again she has mastered an expressionist crossover.



“Brothers” by Genieve Figgis, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 29 x 24 inches.

But her primary influence seems to be the Belgian James Ensor, whose paintings and prints had tremendous influence on expressionism the first time around, in the early 20th century. Ensor, featured in [a current show](#) at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, merged the circus, the morgue and high society with often macabre results, painting actual skeletons in finery alongside the self-selecting denizens of high society.



Detail of “Christ’s Entry into Brussels in 1889” by James Ensor. Oil on canvas, 99 1/2 x 169 1/2 inches. The work is included in the exhibition “The Scandalous Art of James Ensor” exhibited June 10 to September 7, 2014 at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

Figgis has done much the same thing here in her *Making Love with the Devil*. We see a high-ceiling well-lighted chamber room with heavy jacquard drapes and gold bed spread supporting a crazed woman, who looks like she'd rather be somewhere else, spooning with another body that has a skull for a head. It's a fun painting and the fluid brush strokes carry the morning-after subject well. The piece also begs a question: A bit of bio, Ms. Figgis?



"Making Love with the Devil" by Genieve Figgis, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 24 inches.

Still, the work in the exhibition seems out of sequence because it is: Neo-X got the bum's rush at the beginning of the '90s by the excitement surrounding [Neo-Geo](#), the odd moniker for the reemergence of conceptual and pop art (e.g. [Jeff Koons](#)) and no one really looked back at expressionism. It became viewed as slightly retrograde, unintellectual, navel gazing and facile, and already cranked out by the ton.

Nonetheless, there are such things as unfinished sequences, as the late cultural critic [Thomas McEvilley](#) was fond of saying, and Genieve Figgis is performing one. Her work is tough and settled, intact and her own. It has a glow.



"Lady on a Sofa" by Genieve Figgis, 2014. Oil on wood, 48 x 36 inches.

BASIC INFO: "Genieve Figgis: Yes Captain" remains on view through August 6, 2014. Harper's Books is located at 87 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.harpersbooks.com.