

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS



Dennis Kardon: *The End of the Story*, 2000, oil on linen, 48 by 58 inches; at Mitchell Alguus.

Dennis Kardon at Mitchell Alguus

Amid the recent resurgence of interest in figurative painting, most of the attention has gone to artists who have emerged in the last decade or so: Lisa Yuskavage, John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton. It would be great if this swing in taste could also help raise the profile of artists who have long been working in the newly fashionable mode. One of the best of these is Dennis Kardon, a New York-based painter who has been showing since the early 1980s.

This exhibition of new work concentrated on two types of paintings: still lifes and multiple-figure compositions. Surprisingly, Kardon brings a sense of psychological tension and offbeat storytelling to both genres. The figure paintings depict family psychodramas and narrative scenes in a style that has something of Alice Neel's jarring, deceptively casual approach to portraiture, but with a lushness of texture and color that has more in common with Lucian Freud. At first glance, the small, beautifully painted still lifes seem fairly conventional, but Kardon slips in subtly weird elements amid the fruit and crockery. In *Lying to Parents*, we see a stoppered glass bottle containing amber liquid, a bowl of what could be pudding or bread and, on a dish in the foreground, a yellow and pink object (it could be a powder puff or a tropical fruit) that sports a set of swollen, reddish lips. In *The Negro Gang*, the artist uses a palette that ranges from ultramarine violet to Naples yellow to create a succulent assembly of fruits, sausages, a flask, sweets and some more mysterious items, all of them variously melting and erect and adorned with erotically charged tips.

Eros also pervades the figure paintings, but it isn't necessarily

the main subject. *The End of the Story*, for instance, depicts a man and two women lying naked together in bed. The large, nearly square painting's point of view is from up near the ceiling, and the orientation is skewed, so that the figures enter the frame from an oblique angle. In the middle is a dark-haired woman gazing directly at the viewer. Her watery eyes and the wadded-up tissue she holds in one hand tell us she has been crying. Nestled under her armpits, their cheeks nuzzling her bare breasts, are (on one side) a woman smoking a joint and (on the other) a heavy-browed, somewhat Neanderthalish man. The rude quality of the scene distracts from but can't disguise the artfulness of the composition, in which the heads and tangled arms of the reposing ménage à trois circle around a central area defined by a plume of exhaled smoke and a small gold crucifix hanging from the tearful woman's neck. The scene is painted with loose, sensual realism, which Kardon unexpectedly complicates by rendering the man's face in a brushier, quasi-expressionist style. At once highly cinematic and deliciously painterly (as usual with Kardon, the background fabrics become occasions for some bravura brushwork), it's also a painting that practically insists viewers make up their own narratives.

The show included a half-dozen other equally riveting, frequently outlandish, brilliantly painted canvases, including an audaciously contemporary version of Caravaggio's *Sacrifice of Isaac*, with Kardon as the tormented patriarch. How refreshing it is to find a virtuoso painter who eschews stylistic pastiche, embraces emotion and is seemingly unafraid of his own inventive powers, both pictorial and psychological. —Raphael Rubinstein