



Dennis Kardon: *The Cinderella Complex*, 1989, oil on canvas, 48 by 42 inches; at Barbara Toll.

Dennis Kardon at Barbara Toll

Dennis Kardon returns Photo-Realist imagery to the sensual specificity of painting and he does it by way of the breathtaking literalness of his pictorial content. His depicted subjects are chiefly skin and liquids—the very stuff of paint, when you think about it. The pictures are invariably close-ups that fill, or nearly fill, the limits of the picture plane with the surface of the thing(s) portrayed. In a sense, Kardon paints fragments of things—a bare shoulder blade, a portion of the surface of a squash or magnified grains of cooked rice swimming in sauce—instead of the nude figure, the whole squash or still life or the entire place setting. I think of the swooping zoom shot that opens David Lynch's movie *Blue Velvet*, where the camera plows through blades of grass to a severed, ant-covered ear and plunges into the dark ear canal. Like Lynch, Kardon picks at the quotidian until it yields up some gothic surprise. His pictorial magnification and cropping perch his realism at the lip of the swampy pool of the grotesque before it gleefully cannonballs in. It's all everyday life, just looked at more closely, long enough for some disturbing associations to settle in. You observe the rather striking resemblance of those rice grains to maggot eggs, see that oysters are rendered in an oil and dammar varnish medium that uncannily mimics their liquid slipperiness, and notice that all sorts of epidermal imperfections show up in his unsettling close-ups of skin.

These are quiet but anxious paintings that slyly intimate the most visually shocking forms of violence to the body. In Kardon's paintings, ripples on the surface of bathwater mangle flesh as effectively as heavy machinery or—and this may be more to the point—Francis Bacon. The most benign of the water pictures is a painting of a foot with red toenails half submerged in bathwater. The water is rendered in the same glistening transparent tones that Kardon uses to paint the oysters. Kardon doesn't imitate surfaces in paint so much as he *enacts* them. His technique is as blunt and scrupulous as Manet's and the plotting of his cropped compositions is as dramatically contrived.

Another artist who springs to mind in any consideration of Kardon's work is Cindy Sherman, and it was a fortuitous coincidence that both Kardon's paintings and Sherman's latest witchy gross-outs opened next door to each other on the same night. The temptation to compare their imagery is irresistible, though I only want to emphasize one point. Sherman has lately been using photography to depict phosphorescent, horrific enchantments, presenting fabulistic imagery through this "truthful" medium. Kardon, by contrast, distorts and exaggerates through the camera-influenced techniques of close-up and cropping, but his is ultimately a realist imagery that just happens to be expressed best in the viscosities of paint.

—Stephen Westfall