Jennifer McRorie: Vanitas

"Vanitas" is Latin for 'empty' or 'worthless'. A popular genre among the 17th century Dutch, vanitas still life paintings brim with symbols expressing the transience of earthly pleasures and the futility of human achievement:[1] flowers die, fruit rots, beauty fades. In less subtle visual lessons, empty sockets return the viewer's gaze from a grinning skull, candles are snuffed out, sand drains from an hourglass. The moral of these Counter Reformation pictures is that rather than invest in temporary delights, we ought to resist the temptations of this world and be more concerned with our eternal souls in the realm to come.

Closer inspection reveals insects feasting on Jan de Heem's sumptuous bouquets. Butterflies and ants steal nectar while caterpillars devour delicate petals. These images excite our pleasure with beautiful things while simultaneously reminding us of their and our looming extinction. It is as if, to this audience, sensual enjoyment is acceptable if kept in perspective: a perfect description of our oscillating natures, our ability to manage contradictions.

Ironically, these gorgeous reminders of death preserve life. De Heem's hyacinth's bloom as brightly as when painted three and a half centuries ago. Art defies mortality, or at least slows decay. Through art, we give figure to our desire to be and signify beyond the ruin of our corporeal aspects.

De Heems's savaged blossoms are, of course, metaphors for our bodies; Jennifer McRorie is more direct for our blunter age. Her *Vanitas* exhibition presents yards of ruined flesh, a dozen paintings of enlarged sections of distressed skin. From a distance, they appear photorealistic. Up close, they are abstract topographies. These pictures are less literal evocations of real skin than her earlier 'fleshy' encaustics. Those works are all sensuous surface, waxy epidermal layers imitating rather than picturing skin. They even feel creepily corpse-like.

McRorie withdraws a little in the present work, gains some perspective. They are more optical that tactile, more conceptual than visceral. The samples are warm figures against contrasting cooler grounds. Blurred edges create volume and lead to areas of sharper focus, recalling how lens's—the camera's and ours—work. Depth of field guides our eyes to highlighted subjects, healed wounds. While her encaustic paintings toyed with a non-objective artistic heritage,[2] the new works are more forceful in their summoning of narrative. We look with the artist as she contemplates the skin of others. We can imagine

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[1] "vanitas." The Bulfinch Guide to Art History. Shearer West, ed. Toronto: Bullfinch Press. 1996. p. 867.

[2] The confrontational enlargements of overlooked, everyday objects, and their cool approach to hot subjects, these works have more in common with Pop art than Abstract Expressionism.

her scanning bodies for wounds; surveying clothed forms and wonder what sorts of marks might be concealed. How did the exchange go? “Would you mind removing your shirt and show me your scar? Can I take a picture of it?” “I heard you were interested in scars. I have a brilliant one. Wanna see?” A certain erotics is implied by this sort of looking. This is reinforced by the ambiguities of scale and location. Most of the images map uncertain areas: is that a hand grasping a wrist, ankle, or some other part? However, erotic possibilities are soon doused by graphic hyperbole. Many people consider magnified scars repulsive. Is that a small cut on a finger or a huge gash across a torso? I think most viewers seeing these works oscillate between pleasure and pain. The skin is beautifully painted but the subject is wince inducing.

The lacerations vary. Some seem due to accident, others are self-inflicted; a few may be surgical. I feel the self-cuttings most acutely. Some of the other wounds are hard to locate and this imprecision blunts empathy. It is difficult to have sympathy pains if you cannot locate the rhyming location on your own body. The sites of self-mutilation are more familiar: wrists, ankles, calves. They are poignant texts written on the body by a distressed mind—or is it the body trying to record its danger to the mind. The marks are addressed like a letter to hoped for sympathetic viewers. Receiving the information third hand, and being helpless to do anything, the scene may make some viewers uncomfortable. Are we to take a clinical view? Are we voyeurs.

McRorie might have let us off the hook by making these pictures into portraits. She could have titled them with the names of her sitters and even provided various scar origin stories. Not doing so evokes narrative only to deny satisfaction. We are left on our own to speculate the genesis of these perturbations. She opens wounds and does not allow them to be sutured by story. It seems another strategy to thwart empathy and evoke a different set of thoughts, pictures that exceed the evocative capacity of words.

Self-cutting, surgery incisions, wounds from adventure are closed and made meaningful when attached to stories. But there is a class of cut that has a different tenor of trauma. The accidental wound, the scar due to chance can be the most traumatic. Such a wound is ultimately unexplainable—something that happened, a puncture due to a chain of reactions but without intent or authorship. Some haplessly nominate these occurrences an ‘act of God’; such is our anxiety over the unexplainable. These wounds may be a class of unreadable signs, testaments to the randomness, meaninglessness, ‘vanitas’ (emptiness) of life. Such a scar may be an existential shock, a sign that we are not only mortal, permeable, perishable, but that there is no author of our destruction. How and where may be established, but not why.

By denying narrative and replacing her titles with their genre (vanitas), McRorie seems to emphasize the existential. Her paintings disturb because they insist on the meaty fact of the body. They do not portray the flesh as a springboard to the spirit, to an after-life, but as an end in itself. There is no allusion to a metaphysical realm. We are flesh. The pictures do not even provide us with a personality to go with the scar. We can speculate on why someone might have wanted to cut themselves, why bad things happen to good people, but we are not comforted by explanation. The evocation of story telling and yet

resistance to specific, conclusive stories, is perhaps the most radical aspect of these paintings.

Perhaps there is some uplift in these seeming morbid pictures. Unlike the skulls and bones in Dutch vanitas paintings, McRorie's subjects are alive. The wounds happened in the past. That their bearers are willing to share them with McRorie and us, suggests that they are emblems of survival.

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