

Brian Keith Stephens: All the Dreams

How close can you get to what is real in Brian Keith Stephens's paintings, even if all they depict is a dream? Here we have a grazing sheep, a boy, an embracing couple, a young woman on a hill; there are some fields, a neck of woods, a horseback rider, two roosters... We enter this pastoral world without a hint of hesitation, because we are drawn to it. We may never be able to tell a rooster from a hen, but there is something ineffable that makes us feel that we belong there, that makes us want to be part of this quiet but overwhelmingly attractive world.

We may start rationalizing this feeling by examining the paintings closely. The images are composed of countless brushstrokes—or, rather, patches or simply drips—that in their turn are made up of the many layers of paint in such a way that it looks like the surface has been partly stripped, partly built up, exposing the process of how the work comes to life. Sometimes we notice that the canvas has been thickened by some other material – paper, perhaps – that was laid on top of it and painted over to accentuate and roughen up the texture. Sometimes the artist puts two canvases and paints them as one. He does not hide the seams and the edges – they can be easily discovered even by a not-so-attentive eye.

Smaller patches coalesce into larger areas of color of close or opposing hues, the extent of which depends on the degree of tension that the artist wants to build up in a particular area of the surface. Similar to texture, color plays a paramount role in this work, because each of the paintings is distinguished by a certain mood, coming from its subject but conveyed through color. *All Dreams...*, for example, is resolved in bluish-grayish tones; *Seeing for the First Time* in greens, *A Simple Song* and *She Always Knows* in reds, pinks and the colors that offset them, the blues and violets. Frequent chiaroscuro – the Caravaggesque contrast between light and dark values of a color to mark a shape – introduces a certain degree of anxiety to otherwise pastoral scenes.

This multilayered quality of the surface and the dramatic chiaroscuro renders the ordinary people and situations quite unusual, poetic, charged with the transforming energy of the painterly surface. This kind of transformation was prized by the Surrealists who were striving to discover the spaces marked by desire in routines of our daily lives. Although the artist uses traditional materials, such as oil and canvas, the layering of the paint reminds us of Max Ernst's frottages in the technique's simultaneous revelation and obscuring of things that may lay behind the surface. And, as a consequence, Giorgio de Chirico's deserted landscapes come to mind whenever we look at such works as *Again Angels...* or *A Thought About Dreams*.

Not all of the works in this exhibition have this mysterious quality of a dream; some are more straightforward. For example, in *Hot and Heavy* and *Turning Off*, instead of Surrealism the artist turns to photography to capture the fleeting moment of rapture, of

something special that could vanish instantaneously, unless it was caught unabated. In these works we can clearly discern characteristics of a snapshot photograph: decentered composition, unusual angles, and seemingly haphazard framing. Representations of roosters, on the other hand, may have found their way to Brian's canvases through his interest in Robert Rauschenberg's combines, in particular to the famous *Odalisk*, presently in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Whereas Rauschenberg deconstructed American painting – and exposed the complex American identity – by turning it to collage, three-dimensional constructions, and assemblages, Brian Keith Stephens gathers it back together on the surface, albeit in a rough, patched up way, without the glossy veneer and finish.

Although the artist creates imaginary scenes, his daily life is his point of departure. Brian Keith Stephens paints people, places, and things that are close to him: the boys that we see in many of them are his sons; the young women are the ones who have caught his fancy; the fields and farm animals are the same he sees every day in the quiet world of rural Connecticut. They are all there to begin with, but we see them transformed through his art, endowed with the regenerative power of his mind and his skill as a painter. This artist loves life and enjoys it and wants us to partake of his joy of the renewed discovery of the magic in the everyday.

With their simple palette and uncomplicated subject matter these paintings focus our attention on what is real in Brian Keith Stephens's art – the strength of his love for life, the sincerity of this emotion, and the skill with which he communicates it to his viewers. The surface of his paintings speaks volumes: in fact, it says everything he ever wants to say to us, with no remainder. We can let ourselves be seduced then by these imaginary scenes, because they assert our right to enjoy life, to be touched by its magic. Like for any true Romantic, art for him is an integral part of life and he builds it up stroke-by-stroke, piece-by-piece, image-by-image. Sometimes, he does not stop at the edge of the canvas. He takes photographs, makes videos, arranges installations. He knows what he is doing in building up his world – and we trust this conviction.