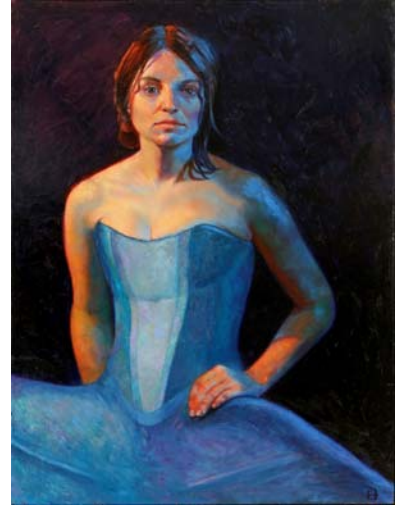


Telling Moments: The Art of Eddi Fleming

By Michael McDonagh

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Fashion rules everything, even art, and narrative art went out of fashion when non-narrative art became the new kid on the block in the 1970's. Non-narrative artists like New York painter David Salle even claimed that the female body in his work was "'content-less', a question of form", as Henry M. Sayre observes in his 1989 book *The Object of Performance*. "But to insist on that, as Salle and his defenders do, is to miss the point . . . It is to act as if there were no history or narrative, only painting." But how is that possible? We are, after all, always telling stories to ourselves, and we're always cooking up ones when we look at art, especially figurative art because the human figure is human like us. Who is the person, we wonder, and how did they end up in this picture, and what are they telling us? The stories we invent about a figure in a picture could be explicit or implicit but we always seem to need a story as a hook.



The narratives in Eddi Fleming's coolly seductive paintings in her first ever solo show may not be overt but they're squarely there in the very fact of the work which the viewer fills in with a story of his or her own invention. Reached by phone at her studio in Croton on Hudson, New York, she's eager to talk about the perceptual and painterly issues which inform her work. "The humanity – that's what I want people to see," she remarks in a calm but deeply centered voice. "Everyone brings their own thing to the table. I feel that my paintings are finished for me but the viewer brings as much as I do to them so that they participate in the completion of the work."

The idea that the viewer completes the work has been a central one in the perception and reception of modernist and post-modernist work for a very long time. The six women who figure in Fleming's *SHE . . . series* here may or not be explicitly looking at the painter as she paints them, or they may be looking into themselves, or beyond her, which is often the case when one is "seen." Think of how you're asked to smile when someone snaps your picture. The "real you" may be caught but it's more than likely eluded the photographer, or in this case, the painter. Fleming's subjects sit in silence before her, arrested in the moment she paints. This ambiguity of intention and realization has always been part and parcel of the painted human face or figure, and Fleming has noted that she's "working both for and against the formidable history of painting."

The oil on board portraits here participate in that history in surprising ways. *SHE . . . is Caught in Green Light* (2012) is a three quarters cropped just below the shoulders view of a woman which is not unlike a reversed three quarters view of Netherlandish master Rogier van der Weyden's 1460 "The Portrait of a Lady" albeit with Gauguin's or Nolde's hot expressive colors, and it's the most frankly Expressionist

portrait in Fleming's show. *SHE . . . is the Performer* (2012) almost begs comparison with the full frontal albeit clothed views of women that “the painter of modern life” Manet executed so powerfully, though the starkness of the model’s nearly sculpted blue dress and the figure’s overall modeling are wholly postmodern. And then there are the somber black or largely black and/or blue sometimes stumbled backgrounds which frame and isolate Fleming’s sitters.

Indeed isolation seems to be a major theme here, or as the artist puts it “I want to give that isolated view when I'm placing them (my sitters) in an emotional situation alone”, which of course adds to the ambiguity. But is the fact that all of the women here are seen alone a comment on their isolation in contemporary life, even though Fleming admits that “a lot more women are at work” and hold positions of power in contemporary society. But are these six women a comment on how isolated they and we are under all our techno glitz? Fleming’s artist statement gives a clue.

“My response to our diverted, technologically mesmerizing world is primarily expressed through painting, as a way of seeing, a practice, and a serious pursuit of the representations of emotional states acknowledging human interconnectedness.” So maybe Fleming’s seemingly alienated figures aren’t really isolated and alone because we see them through her eyes and ours, and that bridges the gap between what Martin Buber called the “I” and “Thou”, or as our Buddhist friends point out -- “The idea that we’re separate is an illusion, and not a fact.”

But none of this would matter if the visual/emotional contract, if you will, between the artist and the viewer wasn’t charged with meanings gleaned from looking at her women as they look back at us. It’s not a gender issue, but a human one, and Fleming’s sumptuous yet stark portraits give off a slow ambiguous hum, because what we don’t say is even more important that we do say. But everyone of course ignores this fact, and that’s where art comes in, and Fleming’s art honors the unsaid by simply showing it.

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