

The Hartford Advocate
March 1999

The Siren's Call in New Britain
Two diverse shows take viewers into unknown territory.

By Patricia Rosoff

The art that has risen in the past 20 years or so hasn't played long enough to know what it is, exactly, except different. In art history, or course, only time and distance give perspective. For the contemporary artist, that's precisely the challenge; for the contemporary viewer, that's entirely the fun.

Which is why, much as the New Britain Museum of American Art's beautiful *España* exhibit is a treat in itself, a quick stop into the adjacent space of its "New/Now" gallery—and artist Brett Bigbee's tensely controlled images—makes that experience all the richer. With work that dates roughly a century apart, each exhibit serves up its artists' own self-indulgent enthusiasms; each room proffers that distinct combination of taste and touch and selection that distinguishes one era from another. One room is history; the other is history-in-the-making. What they share is the same sense of compelling, what-the-hell launch—and a siren's call—into unknown territory.

Stylistically, the differences are dramatic. In *España*, wonderful, swashbuckling paintings by John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase set the tone, declaring a braggart's fluent exuberance. These are Americans who apologized to no continental tradition, yet never quite made it into the grubby argumentative avant-garde. Smearred, dripping, exquisite spontaneity marks their work with the personal audacity of a new age, one that understood painterly "touch" as personality, and saw immediacy and responsiveness as the prime qualities of artistry itself.

Other painters in the room sought out gritty realism or its mirror-image, romanticism, as an antidote for the Gilded Age. This was the stuff of revolution, stirred from socialist empathy and damn-tradition defiance; it was also a matter of style and history. All the work in this room is connected to the late 19th century curiosity for all things Spanish, that nostalgia for its still-medieval ties to the church, and the soil (in these works) and the exotic beauty of a Moorish past.

But what, then, can we find in the work of young Brett Bigbee in his large-scale paintings of himself, his wife and child? These are images out of time and out of air, distilled into the most perfectly flawless china finish. Compared to Sargent's, they are deadend, and at the same time vivid, like apricots cooked down to jelly.

If we are to look for the modern impulse, it seems to be everything the *España* aesthetic is not, though the gap between them (abstraction) is folded deep into their choice of representation. Nothing moves on the surface of these works—no breath of air, no suggestion of animal impulse, no intimation of sound, or pulse, or volition. They are

portraits, and highly personal ones, but they are rendered completely distant at the same time: immaculate, pristine, glowingly warm.

To study them is to enter into a kind of elegiac stupor. To pause in front of them is an experience as draining as it is marvelous, for one is compelled to relax under this persuasive, patient hand as one might under the trained expertise of a skilled masseur. The pleasure in the eye is seductive. The beauty of the work is in the mastery of it; its magic is generated by an alchemy of color and surface that renders them as pure as porcelain and as flawless and sweet as a baby's skin.

One has to admire Bigbee's sheer power of orchestration, his distilling abstraction and—in contrast to the earlier centuries' wonderful celebration of facility—his compression. Nothing extraneous is allowed to remain in these works. Everything is formal: figures, arranged front and center (or stacked laterally like loaves of bread on a store shelf), stare blankly out through and past the viewer, seemingly unaware of each other, or of us, as if frozen in a parallel world behind the picture plane.

There is an inert quality in this beautifully felted paint. Its color is built up in a hundred imperceptible layers, tint over tint, the lights as pale as eggshell, the darks as transparent as water. The surface drinks but does not splash. There is no glitter of reflection, no sloughing off of light in such a way as to suggest a connection of realities. It is as if this world were mute and blind, a one-way mirror separated from us by its very corporeality.

Only in the double portrait of Bigbee and his pudgy infant son does this filtering scrim drop a little: the child's ruddy tinge and the quick squirm of his pose breaks through the velvety iron of the artist's restraint. Where in every other work he maintains the still geometry of Piero della Francesca's Early Renaissance calm, in this one image intrudes an infant's rubbery persistence—something strikingly “real” in the fishbowl world of this caressingly iron will.

Such control is disturbing, of course, pregnant and suggestive but at the same time unrevealing. Though Bigbee may borrow the structural clarity of the early Renaissance, he can be accused of none of its assured naïveté. Neither does he seek the release into impressionism itself, which was the breakthrough revolution of the 19th century. Instead, a droning psychological undertone animates these images as surely as it does Magritte's, or that of Blathus.

And there you have it, the amazing gulf between the two rooms. What is offered is the contrast between pre-and post-modernism, a distance that spans internal and external realities in the difference of touch. The large gallery lays out a whole feast of responses to exotic Spain in the latter half of the 19th century. The smaller exhibit sets up an encounter with a young man's very private explorations in the ebbing days of the 20th. Who knows what dreams might stir from its consideration?

España: American Artists and the Spanish Experience *and* New/Now: Brett Bigbee, *both at the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington Street, New Britain, through March 14, 1999.*

