

SUZY SCARBOROUGH'S *PERSISTENT ILLUSIONS: A FIGURE RETROSPECTIVE*

BY KARA GUNTER



"Releasing the Butterflies"

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alking into Suzy Scarborough's exhibition at Tapp's Arts Center, the exhibition of "Persistent Illusions: A Figure Retrospective," is a little akin to walking into the nave of an intimate cathedral of a personal religion. Instead of seeing icons of saints and angels, the Pantocrator Christ, or the Virgin Mary, we instead find the transcendent images of Scarborough's daughter constructed out of layers of collaged book pages, various drawing media and paints, and gold-leaf. These paintings come to life in rich jewel tones, under cracking lustrous surfaces. Scarborough's mark-making is at once contained, steady and practiced, while remaining spontaneous and organic upon closer inspection. These paintings are both larger than life with a modern graphic, illustrative quality, yet they all contain a soulful intimacy which conjures a devotional sensibility.

Scarborough's art exists solidly in and for this current age; however, influences from much earlier periods are keenly visible. Immediately, the Byzantine style of iconographic paintings with the still portraits of saints with simple, geometric nimbus and



"Hummingbird Dreams"

heavy gold leaf comes to mind. While some of Scarborough's works contain more depth of field than those traditional icons, in many cases she still chooses to flatten the composition by adding intricate, interwoven geometric lines and shapes. These designs harken back to those ancient, serpentine Celtic knots—the same ones we see painstakingly drawn by monks from the 9th century illuminated text of the *Book of Kells*. With Scarborough's use of collaged book pages, this con-

nection to illuminated manuscripts becomes even more tangible. Her approach to her mixed-media paintings is still less heavy handed than these ancient examples and we come away with a lighter, more modern, and less-decorative-more-design sensibility.

It is also difficult to ignore hints of Gustav Klimt bubbling under the surface of Scarborough's work. Klimt, who was also inspired by his own encounter with Byzantine art (specifically mosaic works), utilized collage

and gold-leaf to enshrine his elongated and twisting figures in a designed, modern splendor of golden busyness. Scarborough comes to her work in a quieter state of mind though, and the results are much more quiescent and meditative, as seen in *Releasing the Butterflies*. Here we see an example of those Byzantine nimbi, but we also see allusions to Klimt in Scarborough's tile-like treatment of book pages in the background, and in her use of pattern throughout the piece. The figures in



"River Orchard in 5D"

her work (in her artist's statement, she identifies the woman we see in most of her paintings as her daughter) are still, unaffected, and a bit surreal. Scarborough's subject seems to exist in equal parts on two different planes—a dream-like place in sublime composure, and this more corporeal world.

This brings us to the artist's conceptual intent. Scarborough writes that she wants to "...explore this dichotomy between the natural world and the conceptual world" and we do find that subtle juxtaposition everywhere. She doesn't spell it out for us, but instead we see it in small gestures and expressions (especially in the heavy-lidded gaze of her subject that we also see in art depicting the Buddha and even Christ) that suggests an ease of being and a peaceful knowing of a higher state of mind. In *Hummingbird Dreams* we see our enlightened subject with a gaze that suggests inner contemplation, her hand raised in a mudra at her solar plexus while she also lightly holds one end of a string held in the beak of a petite hummingbird. This string, perhaps bridges the gap between those two states of existence. In *River Orchard in 5D*, we see a similar use of symbolism with two

birds perched upon the right and left hand of our subject. Again, her expression suggests gentle wisdom. She stands in a hilly, tranquil landscape with a river flowing behind her. Space becomes shallow and unreal with Scarborough's use of collaged book pages and geometric lines that weave together behind the figure. The symmetry of the pose of the subject and the rosette-type design elicit a sense of balance. Perhaps, this is one of those rare instances where Scarborough has found that harmony she seeks between those dichotomous conditions of human existence?

She calls herself a seeker for "a more natural way of life." Like Scarborough, most of us desire to remain "free from the anxieties and frustrations of this modern industrialized, technology drunk world." Some of us desire to reconnect with a more natural way of living. We try different ways to attain that momentary distance between the anxieties of this modern life and a more pure, real and perhaps sacred way of existing. Some of us pray or meditate to achieve this state, but if you happen to be Suzy Scarborough, you make art. ♪