

ARLINGTON REVIEW

Tommy Fitzpatrick: Object Lessons

Arlington Museum of Art

ARTLIES

#48 FALL 2005

Elizabeth L. Delaney

Object Lessons traces the path of Tommy Fitzpatrick's seven-year journey towards artistic enlightenment. Fitzpatrick embarks on this voyage in rudimentary studies of contemporary iconography and eventually arrives at epiphanic, micro-analytic examinations of the urban scene. Echoing painters who also immortalized their surroundings as cultural identifiers—Thomas Cole, Edward Hopper and Richard Estes, for example—Fitzpatrick takes this notion further, trading in composite scenes for the objects that comprise them. In doing so, he distills, abstracts and re-presents the environment to measured effect.

Object Lessons has the auspicious designation of being the first one-person show to fill the entire exhibition space at the Arlington Museum of Art. Paintings begin in the titanic main gallery but it is not till after the mezzanine and rear spaces have been explored that Fitzpatrick's stylistic progression becomes apparent. While earlier works do not offer the intrigue of current paintings, the entire body does serve as a timeline, connecting the viewer to the artist's thought process and mapping a path to visual discovery.

One of the earliest paintings in the exhibition, *Clown*, signifies the journey's commencement as Fitzpatrick begins to focus on popular imagery as identifiers of space and time. In it, he captures the anthropomorphic quality of the object—a comical structure on a miniature golf course—utilizing a portraitlike composition, elevating a lowbrow icon from its mundane existence. Fitzpatrick extrapolates on this idea with *Carlsbad*. Again, an inanimate object takes center stage but this time without reference to human form or presence. The background is reduced to mere planes of color, while another monumental object—a generic building—becomes a formal study of shape, shade and line.

Fitzpatrick continues down a path to abstraction with *Up*, deleting any sign of traditional perspective. Instead, he extends the idea of monumentality by focusing on a formal presentation of the interplay between independent design elements. As the artist lifts a sectional plane from its supporting environment, he obliterates references to geography and identifiable space, thus reducing the overall structure to a graphic, abstract and universal image. Like a closeup photograph—Fitzpatrick's means of recording his object-build-



Tommy Fitzpatrick, *Trinity Bluff (RadioShack)*, 2005
Acrylic on canvas
75 x 125 inches
Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston



Tommy Fitzpatrick, *Pennzoil Tower Plaza*, 2004
Acrylic on canvas
45 x 75 inches
Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston

ings—the subject takes on its own identity, no longer an unnoticed component of a larger structure; it no longer requires an external frame of reference to confirm its significance in the physical or mental landscape.

Trinity Bluff (Radio Shack) broadens Fitzpatrick's object-study, allowing the viewer a glimpse of the building's surroundings; however, reflections in the windows are the only means to this visualization, creating a virtual environment in which we then contextualize the object. In this manner, areas that would typically function as fore-, middle- and

background merge into one field, subverting recognizable perspective. Once more, we find that the exaggeration of detail can serve to monumentalize an extracted section of architecture.

Pennzoil Tower Plaza represents a marriage between the virtual environment and a self-contained viewpoint, enticing the viewer into a complex field of reflection and multifaceted perspective. Here, Fitzpatrick's tightly rendered replication of a slick section of building becomes an exciting visual jaunt among surfaces, multiplied by the reflectivity of glass. Sparse yellow dots punctuate the space as light emanates from the building in a mechanistic allusion to human presence—the only such reference in this object-portrait.

Fitzpatrick displaces sections of giant edifices to dispose of their hackneyed presence in the urban landscape. Addressing what he calls a "crisis of perception based on our inability to see everything." The artist forces us to confront—on canvas—formal details we might ignore on a daily drive through the city. By scanning and dissecting architectural surfaces and then extracting and recasting their details on a larger scale, he collapses each overall structure. While abstraction, by nature, may not traditionally translate to monumentality, Fitzpatrick's focused interpretations render architectural fragments forceful and compelling, thus proving that the parts can, in fact, be greater than their sum.