

THE PAINTING CURE

Mark Dutcher's "After the Fall" and Jean Lowe's "The Loneliness Clinic"

BY DOUG HARVEY

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Unless you go out of your way to visit every out-of-the-way art exhibit, you may have missed the recent emergence of one of the most interesting midcareer painting talents in Los Angeles. Mark Dutcher (formerly Housley) has had a string of shows over the last couple of years in some fairly obscure galleries, including powerful solo shows at the Advocate Gallery in the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center on McCadden Place and the upstart Space Gallery at the downtown YMCA. His recent inclusion in the Orange County Museum of Art's 2004 California Biennial and his concurrent solo exhibit at Solway-Jones' Mid-Wilshire gallery have brought Dutcher's work to a more conspicuous level, and the timing is perfect.

Over the course of this piecemeal campaign, Dutcher has refined an already accomplished painting practice into a tightly focused, highly versatile formal and symbolic vocabulary communicating a personal and universal message of loss, mourning and renewal. Though brightly colored and brimming with humor and unironic sentiment, Dutcher's pictures never stray far from the awareness of death. Inspired by a visit to the fantastic Chapel of the Chimes columbarium in Oakland, several of his recent works — including the enormous title piece of the Solway-Jones show, *After the Fall* — have been structured after the compartmentalized walls of cremation niches, quasi-narrative rows of boxes containing urns, floral tributes and burned-out candles.

But alongside these expected memorial tchotchkes, Dutcher places an array of disturbingly out-of-place items — prescription pill bottles, drug paraphernalia, uprooted pansies, dangling bondage gear and jars of Vaseline. The collision results in an outrageous disruption of the solemnity of The American Way of Death, a highly charged confusion between the finality of sex and drugs and the transformational potential of death, and a piercing lamentation for all the absent bodies.

But there's more: Human faces, unicorns and rainbows pop up inexplicably. Vases appear to hover in the air in a separate dimension from the rest. Roughly scrawled linear versions of the bottles and flowers break free from the illusionistic surfaces of the crypt nooks and float across the picture plane, dissolving into abstract flurries of pure paint. In recent columbarium variations, the rows of alcoves themselves have started collapsing from three to two dimensions, folding in on themselves and reversing their trompe l'oeil trickery, verging on geometric abstraction somewhere between late Jasper Johns and '70s rec-room supergraphics.

Other paintings appear to isolate single units of these postmodern postmortem condos and examine the complex social dynamics of their various inhabitants.

In these works, the implied comic strip-style linear narrative of the larger columbarium pieces is translated into a freeze-frame from an elaborate puppet-theater soap opera, and the psychological potency of the individual players is magnified exponentially. In particular, the flora has been getting wiggy, growing to monstrous proportions and sprouting all manner of mutant blossoms — even spilling out into space in the form of exquisitely lyrical painted rosebush sculptures.

These intimations of theatricality and multimedia facility aren't signs of exploration but rather of consolidation. Though trained as a painter, Dutcher has an extensive history as a performance and video artist, sculptor, writer, experimental curator (he included my own work in a motel show a few years back) and puppeteer. As his current body of work has evolved, these sundry avenues have been subsumed into the superficially more conservative media of painting, drawing and sculpture. This makes Dutcher's work a distinctive example of an essential but generally overlooked aspect of contemporary painting: the capacity of the living language of painting to absorb and recombine even the most "avant-garde" artistic practices.



Mark Dutcher; Five Good Ideas and The Well

Another Southern California artist fruitfully blurring these genre boundaries is San Diego's Jean Lowe, whose latest installation, *The Loneliness Clinic*, is currently ensconced at Rosamund Felsen Gallery. Lowe's last show at RFG was dominated by a series of enormous landscape paintings conflating 18th-century French Empire aesthetics with contemporary multinational corporate sprawl. Though a powerful and funny showing somewhat akin to Sandow Birk's ambitious projects, the real treat for me was tucked away in the side gallery — a library of loosely painted papier-mâché dummy books on equally faux bookshelves, belonging to one hypothetical "Dr. Pohaten." The painting and sculptural novelty of the work was surpassed only by the tremendous (and biting) humor of its individual components — the eight-volume edition of *How To Simplify Your Life*, for example.



Mark Dutcher; After The Fall

The Loneliness Clinic reverses these proportions, with a single landscape of an archetypal La Jolla housing development occupying the side gallery, and what appears to be the psychiatric offices and waiting room of Dr. Pohaten filling the large main space. Lowe's earlier installations also contained plenty of Empire-style furniture and decorative knickknacks rendered in the same enamel on papier-mâché as the books. *The Loneliness Clinic* is appointed with an appropriately modernist sensibility that ups the ante considerably. A rickety simulacrum of a Louis XIV armchair as a metaphor for the impending collapse of the Western capitalist empire is palatable-enough critique in art and academic circles. Start messing with a black-leather Eames office chair and the academic sacred cow of the "talking cure," though, and you're hitting much closer to home.

Slapstick gibes (the Donald Judd-like configurations of Kleenex boxes) and subtle detail (the pitch-perfect potted plant) abound in the furnishings, which manage to successfully update and politicize the hand-painted pop sculptures of Oldenburg et al. — but *The Loneliness Clinic* hits its stride with its marriage of masterful paint handling and textual content. The waiting area is supplied with a superabundance of reading material, including an unopened bundle of clam-adorned *Feminist New Englander* magazine and two large racks displaying titles like *Modern Careers* ("Six Simple Steps To Enjoying Your Job" over a six-pack of Coors Light) and *Gourmet* ("Sexy Dinners" over a praying mantis eating her mate). The good doctor's office is well-stocked with more books and periodicals (*The Moral Life: Loopholes, Exemptions and Dodges*; *Making Court-Ordered Community Service a Full-time Job*) and an impressive array of framed certificates, which on close inspection range from a DMV revocation of driver's-license suspension (much fancier than the one I got) to a document declaring the absent physician a winner in the Lawry's 5-lbs. Challenge.

But the literary strain takes its strongest and funniest turn in a mini tour de force in the rear gallery. Across the surface of 20 sculpted "pads" of yellow legal notepaper, Lowe draws a scathing portrait of the blithely narcissistic analyst with notes like "10/12: Pt. appears agitated, unkempt. Expresses suicidal ideation. Talked about feeling depressed and wanting to 'end it all.' (I'm tempted to help her if she keeps scratching my Le

Corbusier.)" You don't need to know that this work was inspired by rummaging through the effects of Lowe's late father — a shrink, of course — to appreciate the complex narrative interplay encoded in its visually sumptuous paint-handling and subversive artsy-craftsy sculptural tropes. What takes Lowe's work to a new level in *The Loneliness Clinic* is the use of an absent fictional protagonist to tie together the artist's wide-ranging literary, visual, environmental and sociopolitical concerns into a persuasive and entertaining whole. And it's good *for you*.

MARK DUTCHER: After the Fall | At SOLWAY-JONES, 5377 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles | Through December 30 | (323) 937-7354

JEAN LOWE: The Loneliness Clinic | At ROSAMUND FELSEN GALLERY, Bergamot Station B5, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica Through December 24 | (310) 828-8488