

American Arts

QUARTERLY

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Henry Clay Frick and the Virtue of Art

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Contemporary Portraiture

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An Aesthetic of Doubt?

veiled by manes of hair, sunglasses or umbrellas. When he tries a straight-on portrait, as in *Shop Girl* (2010), some of the mystery evaporates. It's the relationship of the figure to the setting, the human body to the spatial configuration that carries a charge of visual interest, as happens in *Message* (2008). The pretty woman with messy dark hair, in urban summer casual separates and dark sneakers, sits on the painterly grey steps, ignoring the viewer, staring at her cell phone and unaware of how her pose brings the architecture to life. Susan Powell Fine Art, 679 Boston Post Road, Madison, Connecticut. Telephone (203) 318-0616. Email susanpowellfineart@gmail.com

Brad Reuben Kunkle

Over the centuries and across cultures, gold grounds have been used to suggest what W.B. Yeats called "the artifice of eternity." Shimmering surfaces evoke otherworldly environments: paradisaic backdrops in Byzantine mosaics, the hagiographic heaven of medieval painters, the stylized natural world of Japanese screens, the jeweled abstractions that engulf Gustav Klimt's figures. Some contemporary painters add gold or silver leaf to achieve a reliquary richness and aura of antiquity. At the same time, metallic paint has a modern edge because it emphasizes the flatness of the picture plane and, ultimately, the fictionality of illusionism. Brad Reuben Kunkle is a notable proponent of this tradition, on display in his distinctive, hyper-Romantic paintings at Arcadia Fine Arts in New York City (April 22–May 7, 2010), in a world premiere solo exhibition.

Kunkle places himself firmly in a certain nineteenth-century tradition. He studied painting at Kutztown University under George Sorrels, who was taught by a pupil of William Adolphe Bouguereau. But his style, which evolved through a decade of independent research and experimentation, diverges from straightforward academic art. His sensibility grows out of an intoxication with the world created by the Pre-Raphaelites, where, he says, "a subtle, supernatural beauty seems to be hiding under the breath of women...where something beyond our natural perception is waiting to be found." Kunkle's contemporary goddesses, nymphs and dryads—posed in woodland spaces or decorative sanctuaries—are numinous figures. The girl-priestess in *Two Suns* (all works 2009–10), seen in cameo profile, holds up a salver in ritual offering. Flakes of gold leaf rise like incense smoke. The backdrop has the smudgy, near-abstract quality of a Tonalist landscape. The young woman in *The Gold Choker* seems more modern: bare-shouldered, spiky-haired and self-aware. Like Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lilith, she is "subtly of herself contemplative." This is a compositionally striking painting in an unusually narrow format (64-by-21 inches), with the niche-like space further constricted by dark framing elements, the silhouette of a column on the left, the edge of a table on the right. *The Gold Choker* also exemplifies the complexities of Kunkle's approach. The figure has a



Brad Reuben Kunkle, *Girl with Serpent and Pearls*, 2009–10

COURTESY ARCADIA FINE ARTS, NEW YORK CITY

dusky monochromatic sheen, reminiscent of old photographs or the grisaille of early European masters, which Kunkle values for its “mysterious quality.” He uses mostly black and white oil paint for flesh; the occasional touch of muted blue or red gives the paintings the look of hand-tinted films from the turn of the twentieth century. The jewelry, the necklace and a bangle bracelet, provide the warm accents in *The Gold Choker*, but the backdrop is a luminous, platinum-pale art nouveau wallpaper in silver leaf. In *Girl with Serpent and Pearls*, the silver-leaf backdrop forms an art nouveau forest. The girl looks like a chic flapper in a glamour photograph from the 1920s, and the snake is a perfectly flat ribbon of gold leaf.

What seems particularly interesting is how many ways Kunkle can come up with to mix monochromatic realism with metallic leaf. Every picture presents multiple registers of representation and, in most cases, he melds the different levels into a seamlessly coherent vision. In *The Watering Hole*, a girl in a brown tunic kneels beside a vortex of silvery leaves, a terracotta pitcher by her side. The leaves are brushy, painterly, in a way different from the flatter gold accents in some other pictures. Kunkle, who worked as a decorative painter in his

mid-twenties and leafed entire walls in copper, has developed an innovative technique for combining mediums. After laying down the composition in oil, he applies sheets of gold or silver, manipulating the edges of the figure with an etching tool. He burnishes the leaf and works it into the canvas, then shells it, which allows him to paint on top of it. In *The Water Hole*, those brushy paintstrokes depicting leaves shimmer with light, become the principal source of light in the picture. In *Imprint of Millais*, silver and gold brushstrokes delineate a leafy veil through which the cool-toned profile of a dreamer appears. In *Hide and Seek*, the gold is carved into carefully shaped leaves and rosy fruit. The chestnut-haired girl is clearly based on a photographic model, but the artifice of her nearly monochromatic tonality somehow works with the artifice of the golden foliage.

On occasion, the contemporary look of the model and the sheer luxe of the surface tip the composition in the direction of a high-concept fashion shoot, as in *Revelan*, with its sultry redhead enveloped in gold leaves. At other times, Kunkle explicitly evokes the mythical. In *Eidolon*, a phantom figure hovers above a sleeping girl, as a drift of gold flakes—butterflies, leaves, perhaps Danae's shower—fills the air. The rustic setting, a collapsed barn, adds a welcome note of the folktale. *Summoning a Sleeper* is a lovely riff on Eve, not as Biblical sinner but as pagan earth goddess. The sleeping figure, half-naked in a wind-swept field, stretches out serenely with a dynamic frieze of tree trunks as a backdrop and a flat gold snake as totem animal. Most of the works, however, are keyed more to a mood than a narrative. The girl in *The Audience* has a delicate, expectant face, and the drift of silver and gold flakes that swirl around her and make a crown in her hair are manifestations of magical possibilities. The way Kunkle has etched her profile against the mottled silver of the backdrop is exquisite. This juxtaposition—"when the leaf is shifting and the oil is quiet," as the artist puts it—reveals a sophisticated understanding of negative and positive space, and of layers of reality. Arcadia Fine Arts, 51 Greene Street, New York, New York 10013. Telephone (212) 965-1387. On the web at www.arcadiafinearts.com

George Billis Gallery

A recent show (April 17–May 29, 2010) at George Billis Gallery in Los Angeles juxtaposed three very different contemporary realists, demonstrating once again that monolithic definitions of this complex movement are largely unrewarding. The most interesting work on display was by Jorge Santos, a technically accomplished figure painter with a propensity for enigmatic narratives laced with a dose of irony. Largely self-taught, Santos immigrated to the United States after growing up in politically unstable Angola and Lisbon, Portugal. A cool, anxious sophistication pervades his oil-and-acrylic paintings. *Empty* (2009), an overhead view of a chicly dressed young woman lying across