

# Art in America

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Elena Sisto at Damon Brandt  
By Ken Johnson

Elena Sisto's paintings suggest that moment between being asleep and being awake, when odd, nonsensical pictures pop into mind and then, usually, fade quickly from consciousness. Sisto preserves what most of us forget, that fleeting mood of reverie with its oblique, seemingly inconsequential imagery.

Cartoon characters such as Nancy or Donald Duck; story-book animals like the three little pigs; bits of still-life material such as buttons, stickpins, string, bugs, cherries and bananas; dream symbols such as ladders, campfires and light bulbs running on stick legs; these and more disparate items are sparingly collaged in rebuslike arrangements on airy, mostly white grounds. The canvases are small (usually 18 inches square or smaller) but generously painterly. Stylistically they're indebted to Guston, but deliberate cartoon clumsiness is mitigated by a lovingly careful craft: Sisto is acutely attuned to nuances of color, value, draftsmanship and paint quality to a degree that Guston perhaps wasn't. And Sisto's mood is not as bleak as Guston's. There is a combination of sweet, comic innocence and subtle psychological resonance that calls to mind the formally different but spiritually kindred paintings of Trevor Winkfield.

Much of the charm of Sisto's art is, indeed, the way it steers clear of portentousness yet nevertheless insinuates deep meanings into its facture. In a painting called *Scientist*, for example, the lone image in the middle of a rich field of white paint is Donald Duck using binoculars to scrutinize a book that lies open on the ground at his feet. It is an endearingly ridiculous image, which, on second thought, may make you think about the art-critical trend of rigorously examining art's "textuality" or, to take it a step further, about the way science interposes method and technology between the observer and reality.

Some of these paintings suggest more personal preoccupations – in particular, those that feature Nancy as a protagonist, with whom, one naturally supposes, the artist identifies. In *Stinker*, Nancy is depicted drawing back a curtain and holding a lit match as she peers worriedly into the darkness beyond. Below is a pair of large, angry-looking eyes between which a penis is outlined. This puzzling composition represents, one may guess, the Freudian loss of innocence, the girl-child's traumatic initiation into adult (specifically male) sexuality and the punitive atmosphere that accompanies the sexual in a puritanical culture.

Another picture (Untitled), is a bust-length portrait of Nancy rendered in acridly colored, impressionistic swatches. She is smiling a wide, toothy grin, but her eyes are anxious and, hovering in space next to her, is the same smile disembodied and turned upside down into a frown. Underlying the silliness of the image is a real emotional urgency, a painful uncertainty about what to feel and how to express feeling.

In *Hearth*, Nancy is being carried down a ladder by a fireman in an image that suggests the troubled psychic state of needing a longing to be rescued. Thus, while Sisto's painting in general is engagingly funny, adroitly inventive, tantalizingly enigmatic and beautifully made, the way some of her paintings hint at personal inner vulnerabilities gives her art a touching psychological poignancy.