

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

March 2005

Elena Sisto at Littlejohn Contemporary
By Hearne Pardee

"From Life," as this show is titled, can only be taken ironically, for even though Elena Sisto works from observation, her subjects are toy figurines, no more "alive" than the imaginary daughters she depicted in her last solo show. In these new oils and works on paper she continues to question conventional boundaries between adult and child, reality and illusion. What starts out as play assumes theatrical gravity and artistic complexity.

Compositionally, the new works recall Sisto's earlier images of cartoon characters. Now, however, with richer use of paint and with observation of actual models, she lends greater weight to these apparently random groupings of eclectic figures. Cartoon icons, miniature pets, "homies" from vending machines, Hopi kachinas and even a miniature Sigmund Freud are rendered in densely worked surfaces. Using strong illumination, Sisto creates luminous shadows against pale backgrounds, breaking down the solidity of forms into unified layers of pigment. She articulates the quirky contours of her subjects – products of design and childhood fantasy – with bold painterly effects. Eyes, animated by carefully placed lashes and highlights, are convincingly life-like. Even though we know that these are just dolls, their gazes engage us, much as the gazes of television personalities engage their unseen audiences.

Sisto admires Giorgio Morandi, and like Wayne Thiebaud, who also cherishes that austere modernist, she imports Morandi's painterly light into a popular context. But Sisto's light-filled space is more ambiguous than Thiebaud's. Accumulated layers of pigment lend substance to her space but also tend to dissolve it, as if into the glow of a projection screen. In *Boop*, an isolated Betty Boop extends her arms theatrically into emptiness, but elsewhere emptiness, in its turn, consumes the figures (*With a Melting Mountie*), or erases their thought balloons (*Pie*).

Abrupt juxtaposition and shifts in scale are commonplace in Sisto's work. Contacts between the figures seem accidental, like random juxtapositions in photographs or absurd transitions in dreams – as when Betty Boop's hand overlaps Freud's cigar in *Company*. We don't need the figure of Freud to call attention to the symbols simmering in these paintings, an alchemical brew of sexually suggestive fantasy figures and of animals conflated with humans. But Sisto's process, as she erases figures and words, identifies itself readily with Freud's mechanics of the primitive, preverbal subconscious, embedded here in the sheer sensual presence of paint. Sisto's works impress upon us paint's capacity to render fantasies real.