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Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: Elena Sisto at Lori Bookstein

by Dennis Kardon

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Elena Sisto: Between Silver Light and Orange Shadow

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Elena Sisto, *Green Brush*, 2011. Oil on linen, 25½ x 36½ inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York

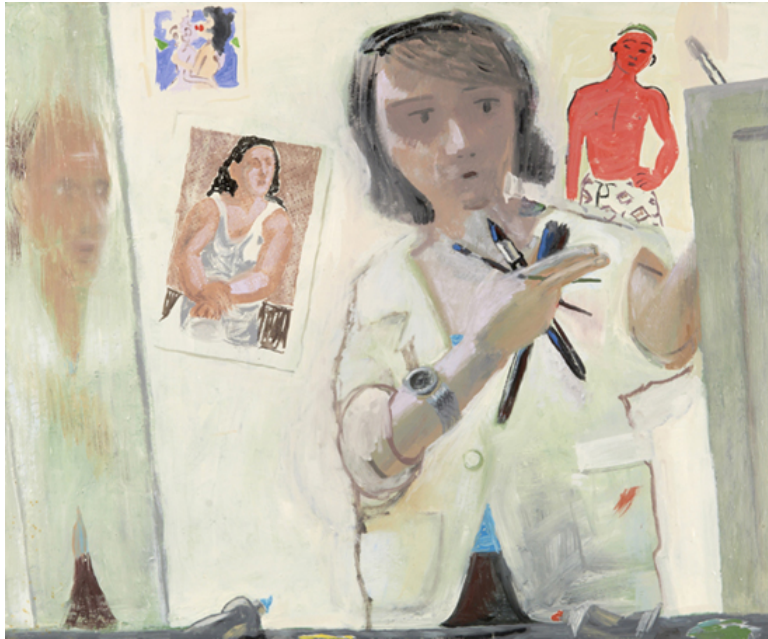
Sentimentality, nostalgia, and illustration are the common pitfalls for a figurative painter undertaking to represent feeling and emotion — particularly when the imagery is invented and not photo derived. There is a huge payoff, however, for facing those risks head on. In her first New York show since 2004 and her debut with Lori Bookstein Fine Art, Elena Sisto takes as her subject the predicaments of young women painters as they embark on their calling. In images that Sisto, in the tradition of Philip Guston, originates from pure acts of painting, her self-critical perseverance has produced work that

is unique, psychologically complex, and moving.

Elena Sisto, like all serious painters, is a formalist. Behind her subject matter, part of the content of her work is the structure of the decisions that constitute painting. To emphasize this, about seven of the twenty paintings in this show are close-up details of her young painter subjects: blouses and patterns and fragments of hands and arms and necks. Each of these paintings becomes a mini universe of inventive facture as pigment turns into light and flesh, and patterns turn into fabric and paintings of paintings, but always revealing the mechanics of their construction from paint.

These “cropped in” paintings (as the artist calls them), deft and colorful, are almost abstract in their formalism. Paintings like *Frogs*, 2013, where negative spaces between elbows and torso become patterned triangles, may assuage viewers not willing to see the abstraction in the formal structures of the other, more psychological paintings. These are the ones that depict various young women struggling with the act of painting. The “cropped-in” paintings, amusing and exhilarating in their invention, gain in complexity through their context with what has remained “uncropped.” And it is these paintings of young women wrestling with their intentions, which comprise the soul of this show. Because of the added implications in the way faces can signify feelings, the range of emotions is broader, the ambiguities more enticing, and the questions to be asked more probing.

In the masterful *Self-Portrait (with Van Dongen)*, (2011) a painting filled with faces, the convergence of all Sisto’s painterly knowledge produces a heady concoction of formal, psychological, gender, and sexual issues. It may be a commonplace notion that a painter, especially a young one, is surrounded by a host of voices that she must listen to, battle with, ignore, or embrace, but this painting elucidates the idea in such a charmingly complex manner that it seems a revelation.



Elena Sisto, Self-Portrait (with Van Dongen), 2011. Oil on linen, 33 x 40 inches. Private Collection, New York. Courtesy Lori Bookstein Fine Art, New York

The picture depicts a white smocked young woman, right hand holding brushes, in the act of painting a self-portrait. Her smock is delineated with a few deft lines from a white wall tacked with painting reproductions, and the back of a canvas, as well as her ostensible reflection in a mirror bookends her. The eponymous Van Dongen of the title, a flame-hued and bare chested *Jeune Arabe*, 1910, peers haughtily at the painter over her shoulder and practically jumps off the canvas. Van Dongen is an apt choice for Sisto as the Dutchman's paint handling and use of patterns clearly inform Sisto's own work.

Head and body tilted in contrapunto to the Van Dongen, the young painter herself, with an expression of intense concentration, dominates the painting. Her face in shadow, her mouth forms a little brown hyphen, and in a supremely subtle painterly invention, Sisto lightens the shadow just above her mouth, to create the impression of her tongue pressing there intently.

The four dark brushes that our young heroine grasps form a Maltese cross of vectors, which, along with her index and forefingers, extended Guston-style, point to the various voices/influences in the painting. Alongside the lithe Van Dongen Arab, a chunky, neo-classical Picasso maiden gazes earnestly at her. And up in the left corner, constituted by the merest blobs of color, are two women obliviously kissing in a passionate embrace. At the bottom, its little phallic head lasciviously poking into the picture is a tube of paint with the tiniest squirt of turquoise protruding from the tip. It is the same color and size as the tiny dot representing a fragment of blouse that appears behind — and defines the edge of — the girl's right wrist.

But most importantly, occupying a gray trapezoid that cuts into the left fifth of the composition floats the spectral reflection of this artist herself, seemingly older, as if wonderingly peering at her younger self from the future. This little sleight of hand elucidates the irony of the "self-portrait" of the title. The painting depicts a young woman painting an image of her self. But like Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, the only painting we actually see the front of is this very painting, which becomes Sisto's own Joycean "portrait of the artist as a young woman."

In what could be called the *Bildungsmalen* genre of painting, it is unique to see a female painter as protagonist. But aside from this feminist act of rectification, what makes these paintings unprecedented is that Sisto constructs a gaze for us that somehow becomes parental.

We regard these young women, not as the next hot young artists, but sympathetically, as daughters and students in the process of becoming. Though the art that Sisto has them making is usually abstract and a bit callow, she doesn't mock them. The very sympathy that these paintings elicit is what makes them so fresh. Youth becomes not a threat or admonition to the older viewers that are Sisto's peers, but something to be fondly nurtured and encouraged, not despite but because of its awkwardness and lack of sophistication. And to her younger viewers Sisto offers the hope that painting can become a tool for understanding their relationship to the world, and that sophistication comes not from conforming but daring to be different.