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Art in Review

By Charles Hagen

Elena Sisto's lush paintings look like chunks of old walls on which graffiti figures have been repeatedly drawn and erased until only cryptic, half-seen fragments remain. Ms. Sisto continues to rely on cartoon heroines to play out her allusive dramas, but of a distinctly different sort than before. Where once Nancy, the no-nonsense protagonist of Ernie Bushmiller's classic comic strip, took the leading role in these narratives, Ms. Sisto now enlists a variety of female (and a few male) characters, notably the bulbous cartoon women popular in men's magazines of the 1950's.

Richard Prince has used similar cartoon bimbos in his paintings, but for very different ends. Where his deadpan images maintain an ironic distance from their sources in popular culture, Ms. Sisto focuses on the decidedly mixed messages of sexual power and exploitation these cartoon characters offer women.

These are beautifully painted pieces, mostly in pastel pinks and blues, and now made with tempera rather than oils. The scarred surfaces and expressive paint-handling lend mythic overtones to the scenes. The fat snakelike form that winds its way through "Eve" (1991) evokes the primal skirmish between the sexes in the Garden of Eden. Other works here suggest cave paintings, with the busty heroines as improbable fertility goddesses.