

Still Life, Unstilled

MARTHA MAYER ERLEBACHER SHOWS HER SURE, QUIET COMMAND OF THE STILL-LIFE

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent



'Martha Mayer Erlebacher and the American Still Life'

When: through Dec. 2

Where: Sullivan Goss, 7 E. Anapamu St., Santa Barbara

Hours: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. daily

Information: 730-1460, sullivangoss.com



'Tic, Tac, Toe'



'Trompe, Trompe II - Plastic'



Sullivan Goss Photos

'Hide and Seek - Camouflage'

Those who recall the previous two exhibitions by the fine painter Martha Mayer Erlebacher at Sullivan Goss may be surprised to find a seemingly very different aesthetic at work this time around. She cleverly embraced and goosed art history with her serio-humorous "Avant Duck" in 2008 and took on anatomical life and death with the gaunt, mortality-flecked nudes in "Emblems of Desire" two years ago, reflecting her own brush with cancer (she's in remission now).

Things get more serious, artworldly-rooted and also essentially more lively, and in very different way with her current Sullivan Goss show "Martha Mayer Erlebacher and the American Still Life." No thematically-loaded fowl or mortal nude in sight here: just a series of ravishing still life paintings, mostly in a deftly painted traditional mode. Her assurance and sense of controlled beauty in the centuries-old genre is enough to make you a true believer, again.

Assured painting technique and luscious use of color and atmospherics combine to make many of her paintings in this grouping reach out for attention. In these paintings, the artist asserts herself in the act of dealing, in some deep and probing way, with the subjects and objects at hand, but she also naturally connects with the tradition, practice and philosophy of the time-honored genre itself.

Her chosen angle on said genre is mostly straight-ahead and has the conviction of the committed. But with several pieces on the wall facing the gallery window, she deviates, at least in small ways. In a few of these, bunches of grapes are nailed to white walls, with plumb line-like pencil markings imposing geometric grids, and alerting us to the art-making process beyond the art. By contrast, "Hide and Seek — Camouflage" is an exercise in excess, with the crazy busy optical effect of fruit against gaudy wallpaper and a tablecloth and reflections in metal bowls conspiring toward dizzy overkill.

Proceed into the main gallery, though, and a calmer, richer experience awaits and begins. This group of still life paintings is the main attraction in her show, a confirmation of a sure, quiet command of the still life painting genre, exercising an exacting realist's gift and an awareness of the meditative undertow embedded in the tradition.

Despite its presumed rules of conduct and artistic order, traditional still life painting nonetheless remains an art rather than a science. The best paintings in the room arrive at their state of appeal, or state of grace by subjective determinations — the admiring eye of the smitten beholder. "Illusion 1 — Cut Lemons" depicts a bowl of fruit, the tougher texture of peels set against the glistening cut lemon insides, and dark green leafage and the handsome dark wood of a table's edge conspiring towards a harmonious compositional poise.

We might expect an over-ripe palette and/or attitude in the painting called "Red," with peppers, tomatoes, cherries and sliced-open pomegranates doing the bold-colored spectral bidding in the scene. Yet somehow, the painting keeps its cool and composure, delicately balancing aspects of form, content, and, of course, the central idea color as protagonist.

Another strong entry in this show of mostly newish paintings is "Hide and Seek — Redware and Fruit II," which, unlike the self-consciously gaudier "Hide and Seek" around the corner, is an abidingly elegant customer. Subtlety prevails here, in a painting whose characters include earthy ceramic vessels, and dark green fruit versus the burst of yellow apples front and center, all in artistic accord.

With this show, Ms. Erlebacher manages to achieve that special depth of good still life paintings. She trains utmost artistic and sensate attentions on these carefully-arranged objects in the calm glow of a stilled moment, while implicitly bowing to a rich history before her. It's an art of the here and now and back then, and beyond.