

METICULOUS ARTIFICE

MIRIAM BRUMER on Rebecca Morales at BravinLee Programs



Rebecca Morales *Untitled (Triad)* 2006
gouache and watercolor on calf vellum, 47 x 49 inches
Courtesy BravinLee Programs

Things are not always what they appear to be and the paintings of Rebecca Morales revel in this paradox. When we first encounter these paintings we think we are looking at specimens of human hair, lichen, moss and knitted fibers pressed and preserved. These paintings are done on rippled sheets of calf vellum, and this furthers the illusion that we are looking at a three dimensional object, a specimen behind glass. On closer inspection, we find that these irregular surfaces have been inscribed with minute gouache and watercolor marks, describing each of the subjects with painstaking fidelity. In the tradition of naturalist botanical and zoological illustration – Dürer's *The Great Piece of Turf* comes to mind – this California-based artist meticulously records every nuance of her various subjects, down to the last tapering tendril. While the fidelity to the observed fact, in these works, is in the stringent tradition of academic illustration, she departs from this approach in one important aspect: in her combining of elements that do not co-exist naturally. This quality takes her work out of the realm of the purely factual, and deposits it into the disconcerting world of the almost fantastic. Can we therefore describe these paintings as realistic? Surrealistic? Or even abstract? Perhaps they combine aspects of all three.

In *Tamara's Cues*, (2004) braided plaits of hair dangle, seemingly suspended from a clump of moss and other foliage. Splayed hairs and diaphanous threads of grass coil and unfurl convincingly in space, while red mushroom-like sprouts add a chromatic liveliness to the whole. Morales brushwork creates many different textures, fuzzy, smooth, gritty or prickly, while the puckered surface of the vellum support contributes strongly to the impression that the images are actually pressed and preserved; it is indeed a tour-de-force of tactile illusion.

Untitled (Triad), (2006) a combination of an embroidered wool tassel-like fragment and a clump of moss, is likewise a demonstration of technical virtuosity. Each detail is utterly convincing in its wooliness, lushness and leafiness. In this piece, which combines human-made and natural subject matter, the result feels less compelling, almost uncomfortable. While the merging of these two sources makes for a distinctly contemporary statement, the effect is jarring and less visually cohesive. According to Morales, "My paintings are a recognition of both realms (the human and natural worlds) presented as equally beautiful." She also states that "My paintings address the process of decay as a curious place worthy of portraits... Maybe there is a repulsion that might emerge after looking at them for a moment. While this painting, among others, makes a point about our throw-away culture, they seem somewhat strained and ultimately less hypnotically integrated. But perhaps this is precisely the artist's intent -- to juxtapose organic imagery with images that focus on how humanity and its detritus are imposed on the natural world. If the aim in these pieces is to disconcert us, it works.

A painting like *Untitled*, 2003, on the other hand, is more subtly disorienting. From a mound of foliage and roots, a single red orb (Is it a berry or a ball of wool?) peers out somewhat mysteriously. Tendrils of roots and leaves wend their sinuous way through the composition. An enigmatic presence exists in this delicately incised composition. Has a man-made texture intruded upon an otherwise all-natural composition? We're not sure and this uncertainty provides an element of mystery.

Do these intensely perceived delineations work successfully as paintings? Not in every case; rather, some have the quality of intriguing fragments. In a sense they can be best described as fascinating illusions -- fragments of natural (and man-made) worlds captured in astonishing facsimile.