

November 2, 2008

William Steiger at Holly Johnson

Exhibit Info: Through Nov. 15 at Holly Johnson Gallery, 1411 Dragon St. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. 214-369-0169, . www.hollyjohnsongallery.com.

William Steiger shares more than a passing affinity with Charles Sheeler. Both painters embrace the engine, the train, the model home – symbols of modernism that shaped the 20th century. Mr. Sheeler and Mr. Steiger each favor a reductive geometry to portray realistically the leading lights of the modern era. The flatness that both relish is essential modern stuff.



The difference between the two? Mr. Sheeler greeted the onset of modernism like a train arriving to the station – and died before Mr. Steiger began painting in the 1980s. Mr. Steiger is observing in retrospect the American modern that Mr. Sheeler ushered to the fore.

Caboose II, for example, emphasizes the rigorous symmetry of the train car even as it is tilted just so – at an angle that Mr. Sheeler, who never painted his industrial landscapes and scenes dead-on, would have appreciated.

Gondola Wheel betrays Mr. Steiger's fascination with industrial canopies and latticework. In his realist brush, the things are reduced back to forms: He's condensing the entire era into a geometric abstract vocabulary, using as few lines and planes to indicate an object as he can get away with.

Swivel, for example, is a painting of an aerial photograph of parceled land. Aerial perspective, photography and industrial agriculture are all the stuff of the 20th century. Rendering the scene in a highly reductive fashion – simple polygons of color to portray farm patch, sky and river – Mr. Steiger offers a realist painting that almost works like geometric abstraction.

Mr. Steiger's repetitive homes – again, pitched at soaring angles that would make Mr. Sheeler swoon – are barely-there exercises in compositional restraint. The sharp, flat planes bring to mind the early cityscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe. It would be dismissive to say that Mr. Steiger's aesthetic, a painting by way of vector drawing, is wholly taken from the 20th century. Better to say that it is highly reverent.

Kriston Capps