

Whiting Tennis

by Shane McAdams

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My initial response to Whiting Tennis's exhibition at Derek Eller was to not respond at all; I lowered my critical defenses and turned my senses loose. There are two basic approaches to viewing art, professional or otherwise: one establishes context up front; the other leads with intuition and establishes context piecemeal. Intuition is sensory, contextualization is cognitive, and thus it is often the thinking person's defense to parsing what is not understood. I unfortunately vacillate between the two, usually leaning on intuition in more optimistic moments and on contextual preconceptions when bombarded by programmatic or commercially motivated art.



Whiting Tennis, "Boogeyman," (2007), plywood and hot melt tar. 83 × 44 × 32 in.

After an onslaught of suspect exhibitions on the night of Tennis's opening, his work came as a welcome tonic. Tennis makes both two- and three-dimensional work; his sculptures, however, provide the experiential foundation for his collages and paintings, and so rightfully they take center stage at Derek Eller. Works such as "Study for Pharaoh" (2007) make use of lumberyard standards like lath, plywood and house paint to create ambiguous objects that reference everything from human figures to Constructivist assemblages, minimalist objects, even memories of a home in the country minus the tire swing on the old oak tree. The title seems to refer to its sarcophagus-like shape, which competes

brilliantly with the *mélange* of disparate images. Tennis generates an ample supply of subtle impressions; however, I started sorting them out after the fact, as one might do with the fragmented elements of a dream. The work initially came over me as a single, complex, abstract flavor—like a delicious soup: perfectly balanced and sophisticated, but ambiguous; separating itself into individual flavors two hours later when burped up. Take “Boogeyman” (2007), a seven-foot-high plywood sculpture finished in melted tar. It is slick and alluring, but retains a rawness and wealth of associations that will eliminate anyone’s urge to classify it. I recall imagining it first as an animistic walrus totem in a museum of Native American culture, then as a section of a derelict railroad bridge. Its scale and verticality soon invited comparisons to the human figure and eventually with the work of Naum Gabo—not a poor litany of random associations for a soot-gray, abstract object constructed from materials out of a lumberyard.

Tennis’s knack for deferring analytical readings of his work is at least partially due to their muted colors and inherent nostalgia. There is a dreamy, days-of-old reverie to his materials and imagery that will take viewers on a real estate tour down memory lane that will feel more acute for transplants to New York City, for whom wood grain, clapboard, and gabled roofs seem especially foreign and distant. “White Owl” (2007) looks like a slice from a gazebo where Lawrence Welk might have played in an anytown park before his big break. It’s painted white with crisscross latticework on the top half and horizontal slats on the bottom. Though it has the shape and size of a cabinet, it feels like a piece of something larger and more architectural.

The collages and drawings in the exhibition may be indebted to the sculptures, but works like “Rooster” (2008) and “Reaper (study)” (2005) add distinctive personalities to what otherwise would have been images of inanimate, wooden constructions. “Reaper,” an acrylic with collage, is especially suggestive, with a moon looming over an eerie shack and a slumped pine tree. Its dusky, ominous tone feels counterintuitive given the unassuming nature of its pictorial vocabulary—a fact that speaks to Tennis’s control of this language and the latent expressive power of his materials.

As I was recalling, let’s say, “burping up,” Tennis’s exhibition hours after viewing it, I remembered something that happened to me a few years ago. I was a passenger in a friend’s car when we saw an acquaintance duck into a pornographic video store. I said, “Hey wasn’t that so-and-so,” and my friend replied, “No it couldn’t be because so-and-so isn’t the type to patronize such an establishment.” I said that it looked just like him, but my friend couldn’t overlook the incongruity of the circumstances. Turned out that it *was* him, but he was seeking material for an art project. The experience reinforced the value of trusting the senses over the mind, but then again, I’ve seen a thousand art shows that virtually begged me to size them up with my brain as fast as my eyes could take inventory. Tennis’s exhibition is an increasingly rare occasion; one suited for the body first and the mind a distant second.