

## *It Figures: Whiting Tennis at Derek Eller Gallery*

review

By Will Heinrich 3/20



'Wilderness Painting' (2011) by Whiting Tennis.  
Acrylic and collage on canvas, 96 x 108 in.  
(Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery)

What united the paintings, drawings, sculpture, and collage of the recent Whiting Tennis show at Derek Eller Gallery was a kind of capillary motion. A step-by-step, fire-brigade method for building mass and covering space, it looked something like a rigorous materialism put in the service of an off-camera but serenely confident faith.

*Blue Cactus* is a five and a half foot tall acrylic and collage portrait of a highly abstracted, three-branched, denim-colored figure resting on tiny brown sofa legs. The sky behind it is painted in short, jutting, overlapping strokes of gray and blue, all of which could pass for both patches of sky and patches of sky between clouds; the ground beneath it in sharper-

edged panels of brown and tan that recede dramatically upward with a jocular Cubist exaggeration; and the cactus itself in white-speckled blue geometric sections that only become figurative in concert with one another.

Unlike the Cubist ambition to record each sensory datum on its own terms, though, none of these separate pieces makes sense alone, and so the only reason to split them apart this way is to reveal the process—not in the interest of truth, transparency, or critical self awareness, but because the process, for all that it's only visible through its effects, is the part that's really alive.

*Aardvark*, another large acrylic collage, looks like a magical realist chicken coop into which the farmer's forgotten to put windows or doors. Against another piecemeal sky—like Cézanne trying to be cozy, or Klee unthreatening—stands a headless, horse-shaped figure on tiny legs, puzzled together from geometric panels bearing a woodgrain pattern. In the back, a small, watery American flag flies atop a blue and slate gray hill. What's striking about woodgrain is that its light and dark stripes can sustain an infinite degree of variation while continuing to move in the same direction. Underneath the coop, as in *Blue Cactus*, a comically modest black shadow pushes back against the shallow perspective.

*White Crab*, a three-foot-high plywood-and-paint construction hanging on the wall, is put together from triangles and trapezoids, a saucer-shaped head from which dangle angular legs ending in pointed claws. In places the paint is rubbed away to reveal the yellowish wood. Standing out from the series of drawings hung salon-style in an oval constellation, along with a painting, a sculpture, and three collages, is *The King*, an incredible, asymmetrical tower, rising to a crown, rendered as a pastel framework doubled in black and yellow. In the painted skies, the joins between pieces seem to record the artist's arbitrary decision to interrupt his process, but in drawings like *The King*, the relationship among the constituent shapes is more intelligible. A triangle leads to a rectangle leads to an arc, and slowly, as if with a Ouija board—because despite the inevitability of their direction, they seem no more conscious than the growth of a tree—a series of intuitive decisions draw out a figure.

*Tabletop*, a low, octagonal found table, once painted white, now peeling, sits on an immaculate, low wooden pedestal. Covering the table completely, and rising almost to eye level, is an eight-sided plaster cone that ends not in a point, but in a truncated flat surface. In other words, it, too, is headless.

The down side of a strict conceptual division between body and mind—of treating a work of art as a record of the process of making rather than as an incarnation—is that however closely flesh may sit to spirit, if there's any clear division at all, it means that the flesh is dumb. And if the flesh is dumb, then the common purpose of all those separate blind decisions that build a headless aardvark or llama-shaped cactus, would be to lock the viewer out, visually as much as emotionally.

But we aren't locked out. The presence of stumpy shadows means that the goal of figuration weighs more heavily, in the end, than the process of painting it, so that the headless forms aren't the *product* of a rigorous materialism in the service of an off-screen faith—they only look like it.