

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

JANUARY '09

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

WHITING TENNIS DEREK ELLER

In his third solo exhibition at Derek Eller, Seattle's Whiting Tennis wittingly conjured a nostalgically tinged, derelict rural America. The 22 works shown (all 2005-08) ranged confidently across sculpture, painting, printmaking, collage and drawing; most represent weathered, tumble-down structures and seem stuck together with string and spit. They recall artists from Philip Guston to H.C. Westermann, but strike a highly individual tone and, in the case of the paintings, incorporate an unusual combination of mediums.

Though they're looming and dark, the ramshackle appearance of the two-dimensional works' subjects lends them an endearing vulnerability. In fact, gallery staff says, the 54-by-40-inch, acrylic-and-collage-on-canvas *Senior* recalls, for the artist, an elderly figure leaning on a walker. It depicts a seemingly unfinished gray stone tower; two uneven walls give way to a spindly wooden skeleton, and a hunched blue patchwork form suggests a figure leaning into the interior. *Rooster* (70 1/8 by 55 1/2 inches) shows a tower with trapezoidal windows that is seemingly built from large scrap boards. In all the images here, Tennis uses a monotype process to capture the grain of various pieces of plywood on odd-

Whiting Tennis:
Rooster, 2008, acrylic
and collage on canvas,
70 1/8 by 55 1/2 inches;
at Derek Eller.



shaped pieces of paper, from which he assembles his fanciful structures on canvas; he paints the backgrounds. The funniest of the lot was the 7 1/2-foot-wide *Blue Hamburger*, which at first seems an abstract composition of collaged wood-grained paper and painted blue and white passages. Look closer and there emerges a small house cobbled together from collaged-paper simulations of plywood sheets. Gaps in its surface are covered with blue plastic tarps or clear plastic sheeting, and a sign on the latticed wood door reads "back in 5 minutes."

Two large floor sculptures on low plywood bases bring the paintings' quirky edifices into three dimensions. Standing 83 inches high, *Boogeyman* is a roughly pyramidal wooden form, with an appendage on one side supported by four-by-fours, the whole covered in tar for a shiny, tactile black surface. A latched door suggests possible entry,

as though this were some rural Darth Vader's own privy. *The New Green*, at a more modest 56 by 34 by 32 inches, is a narrow, five-sided, irregular-shaped wood chamber clad with wood shingles painted a pale green that shouts '70s suburbs. An open part of its top is faced with polyethylene sheeting, providing the only glimpse into a dark interior. But it also sports a small latched screen door, which makes it resemble a compact pigeon coop.

Several wall-mounted, painted-wood sculptures, each between 1 1/2 and 2 feet high, suggest birdhouses; one is called *Dead Bird*, another *White Owl*. The similar-sized *Shop Kit*, with various found objects hanging from hooks on a pegboard—including a letter postmarked 1976, a prescription bottle from the 1960s and a checked tea towel—veers too much into the literal. For my money it was the only false note in an otherwise delightful evocation of an old, weird America.

—Brian Boucher