

Gallery chronicle

by Daniel Kunitz

The improbably named Whiting Tennis conceals wit in the sly illusions of his painting technique. Obsessed with patterns, Tennis creates wholly representational pictures by combining acrylic paint, collage, and block-cut prints in such a way that one can never quite figure out how they're made. His painted passages often look as though they were printed; some of the printed areas turn out to be collaged elements of, for instance, wallpaper or wood-grain patterns either found, printed, or painted by the artist, depending on the work. To further complicate matters, Tennis often makes larger works composed of pieces of paper that are either painted on, printed on, or found collage elements, so that what appears to be a painting or a print work is in fact a collage in which the various sheets of paper overlap at times, though not so much that they greatly disrupt the image that they compose. Tennis's first solo show in New York, at Derek Eller Gallery,⁴ brought together a number of smaller works and one large one, all of them depicting commonplace, even banal, scenes and images: old houses, broken-down buildings, a stand of trees, suburban landscapes, a flag, the sky.

After looking for a while at these works,

⁴ "Whiting Tennis" was on view at Derek Eller Gallery, New York, from September 6 to October 6, 2001.

one realizes that the choice of quotidian subject matter is, in part, a canny means of counterbalancing—and calling attention to—the entirely unordinary techniques with which they were made. The largest work on view, *Mazama Site #1* (2001), is of a ramshackle prairie house with a ruined shed in front. To the right of this shed sits a field of high grass surrounded by tree-covered hills under a blue sky. The 59 x 88 inch work is a conglomeration of painted, printed, and found sheets of paper, and, in a funny aside, strips of masking tape hold the ruined shed to the canvas. Tennis's muted colors only emphasize the humdrum nature of the scene: dark green trees, greenish yellow grass, brown and white cement blocks in the house, green-tinged black tarpaper on the roof. It is the patterning that captivates. Like Bonnard, Tennis finds rhythm in wood grains, the repetition of leaves in trees, in blades of grass, stacks of lumber, walls of brick. The smaller works—such as *Neighborhood* (2001), a rear view of suburban homes, bare trees, a fence, grass, and, in the foreground, a lone ruined chimney; *Theater Shop Group #3* (2001), a collage, cubist in its fractioning, of a single structure built of paper with different brick patterns and wood grains; or *American Flag* (2001) where the flag, printed or painted, flies against a slate-blue sky—hang like comely riddles waiting to be solved. Given his unlikely pairings of subject and method, Tennis almost certainly wants to cause viewers to do a double-take, to provoke an extended examination. Far too few younger artists aspire to such complexity, and even fewer are capable of achieving it.