

The Arizona Republic

Review: Botanical art is about the things of the world

by Richard Nilsen - Oct. 2, 2009



There is a pear on the wall at the Phoenix Art Museum that I'd rather look at than eat.

It is delicious to the eye.

It isn't only that it's so beautifully drawn, but that its particular medium - watercolor on vellum -- practically glows by it-self. Ordinary paper is the neutral ground on which an image appears; parchment has a life and vitality of its own.

Painted by Connecticut artist Kelly Leahy Radding, the pear is part of "A Natural Perspective," a new juried show by members of the American Society of Botanical Artists. It's a small show, hung in a side gallery with no fanfare, but it is one of the most pleasurable exhibits we've had in many a moon.

Botanical art is a specialized art, a subgenre with its own rules and expectations. Its artists must delineate

a plant or flower with exacting precision, so its genus and species are clear, with any identifying features highlighted. Most botanical art finds its function illustrating books and magazine articles, and serves more as an identification aid than as art.

It's ordinarily descriptive rather than metaphorical, and hence relegated to the less exalted spheres of painting, like medical illustrations or courtroom sketches.

But at its best, it rises to a higher level. Radding's pear does that; you might best compare it to the ravishing Georgia O'Keeffe apple on view elsewhere in the museum. Like the O'Keeffe, Radding's pear glows from the inside.

The formula is overt: A single specimen, or small group, is drawn against a blank backdrop, eliminating the visual confusion you have whenever you try to see a single flower in a garden or a single shaft of grass in an unmown lawn.

But when done well - like most of the examples here - the plants take on an almost mythic importance. We are given the opportunity to see them not en masse but as individuals. We are put in touch with their “thing-ness,” their quiddity. In the terms of theologian Martin Buber, they become a “thou” not an “it.”

One cannot help but recall one of Salvador Dali’s simpler paintings, of a loaf of bread broken open in a basket, more real than actual bread and glowing with a kind of sacredness: It is the host: bread transubstantiated.

Or one thinks of Albrecht Durer’s “Large Piece of Turf,” one of the oddest of paintings normally anthologized in art-history texts, a simple piece of earth, dug up as by a trowel, with all its grass and weeds intact and drawn with infinite love.

It is art that’s about the things of the world, not about itself. It looks outward rather than inward and finds not a cold objectivity but the same sense of individual identity that we normally recognize only in our inner lives.

So, although one may think of botanical art as less ambitious than the “important” art in avant-garde galleries and museum shows - it doesn’t attempt to forge a new future for the art form, doesn’t attempt to change political inequities, doesn’t seek to answer life’s big questions - at its best, botanical art accomplishes more of what art really is all about than many less successful shows of greater ambition.

Read more: <http://archive.azcentral.com/thingstodo/galleriesmuseums/articles/2009/10/02/20091002botani-cal1004.html#ixzz6pCi3k5yJ>