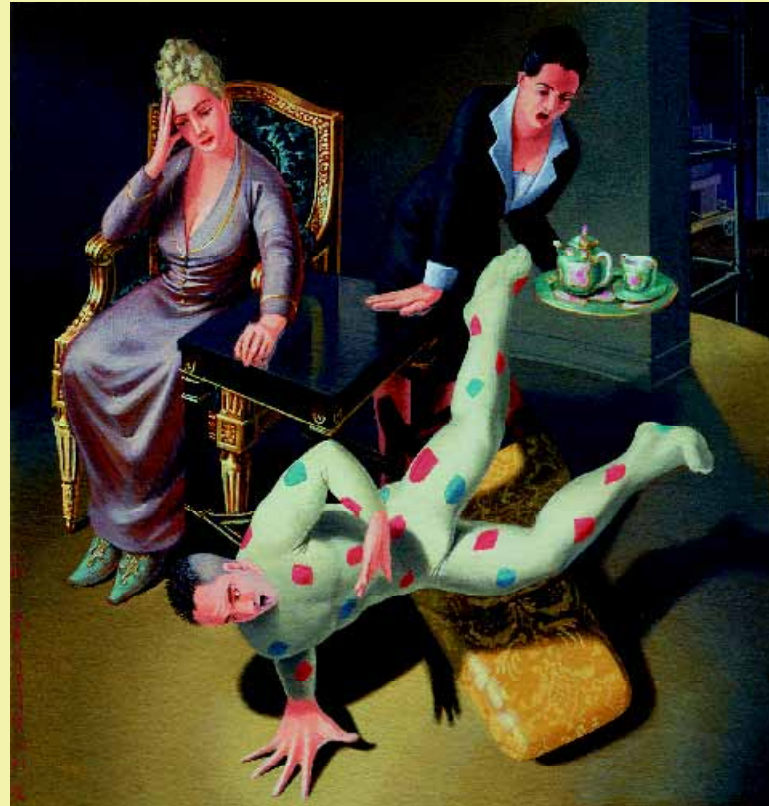


Robert Schwartz

SEPTEMBER 8 – OCTOBER 7, 2011



**THREE VIRTUES,
CIVIL AND DOMESTIC**
1991
GOUACHE ON PAPER
4 1/4 x 4 IN.

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COVER: **LIVING ON GRASSHOPPERS** 1990 GOUACHE ON PAPER 8 x 8 1/2 IN.

In collaboration with **HACKETT | MILL** San Francisco

Photographs courtesy of **HACKETT | MILL** San Francisco, Tim Pyle, Light Blue Studio, Inc.





BURNING SAFELY OUT WITHOUT DAMAGE 1991 GOUACHE ON PAPER 6¾ x 8½ IN.

ROBERT SCHWARTZ'S small gouache paintings will always burn bright in my memory, even though he departed this earth ten years ago. That's only partly because he has the dubious distinction of having been the subject of my very first art review, published in 1991 in a column that Jed Perl once edited for *Art & Antiques*.

I was home visiting my parents in California when Jed asked me to review a group show at a gallery in San Francisco. It was comprised of work by painters working in a style that was then called "contemporary realism," which combined figuration, realism, and narrative.

Schwartz's four paintings bore all those hallmarks, but they also sang out to me in a way that the others did not.

Made with care and precision, and glowing with luminous color, each work presented a scenario that grew more intriguing and perplexing the longer you looked. One pictured a bevy of nudes posing before people whose reactions ran the gamut like from horror to reverence. Another depicted a man garbed only in a crown and underpants signing a document before a patrician audience.

At the time I concluded that these paintings were making sly commentary on the savings and loan crisis,



LIFE OF BIRDS 1991 GOUACHE ON PAPER 6 x 6 IN.

and Jesse Helms's crusade against nudity in art. Yet at the same time they also left me wondering, "What on earth is going on here?" I find myself thinking exactly that when I see Schwartz's work now, more than twenty years on.

His characters — not to mention their motivations and actions — are often quite mysterious. In *LIFE OF BIRDS* (1991) a woman costumed like a Petit Trianon milkmaid crouches in the woods, gazing into the distance, while a half-clothed man hovers over her in the treetops, his toes balancing on a limb, his hand outstretched toward a cluster of berries. Is he real or a figment of her

imagination? If this is an annunciation, why do they seem so unaware of each other? And if he is the bird, why does his body look so animalistic? Behind this fantastical scene is a recognizably mundane universe, filled with traffic signs, people, cars, and blocks of the Mediterranean Revival buildings you see in San Francisco, Schwartz's home from 1971 until his death in 2000.

Many of the paintings in this show present dream-like scenarios that will be familiar to Schwartz aficionados: completely naked people mingling with people who are clothed. The nudes in *LIVING ON GRASSHOPPERS*



PERSPECTIVE AT THE FOOT OF THE TOWER 1992 GOUACHE ON PAPER 6¾ x 8½ IN.

(1990) are shown clustered on a dais before a long piazza lined with buildings, as if the statues in one of Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical town squares had come to life. In *PERSPECTIVE AT THE FOOT OF THE TOWER* (1992), a naked man and woman stand on a balcony, overlooking a street bustling with passers-by who notice neither them nor their Edenic state. In fact, most of the people are looking away from each other — a fact underscored by the underlying geometry of the scene, whose zigzagging, diagonally-placed streets and buildings play off against the squares, rectangles and circles of the window panes.

Because Schwartz's paintings typically present a universe full of such metaphysical signs and portents, his paintings have often been linked to those of the early Italian Renaissance. To my mind, they have always seemed kindred spirits to the predellas painted by Fra Angelico. Schwartz depicts his tiny beings with a similarly cool brand of compassion, and though the allegories and fables they enact have been updated for the modern world, the sense of divine mystery that inspirits them lives on.

—CAROL KINO