



Celia Gerard: Regions of Unlikeness

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In his seminal essay “Cezanne’s Doubt,” philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote of the French artist’s painterly process, of how vacillating fields of chiseled brushstrokes simultaneously defined and questioned the objects at hand. Merleau-Ponty concluded that for Cezanne “‘conception’ [could not] precede ‘execution.’” The results, rigorously analytical and forever skeptical, set into motion the idea of the canvas as a public accounting of an artist’s tussle with uncertainty.

Having filtered its way through Modernism—roughly speaking, from Cubism to Giacometti to Action Painting to any number of artists eager to flaunt their egos and erasers—“Cezanne’s Doubt” has become as much a cliché as any other approach to art-making. That is, until someone comes along and demonstrates why it is, in fact, viable and vital. Celia Gerard’s black-and-white mixed media drawings, at Sears-Peyton Gallery, remind us that tradition is for the taking should an artist have the gumption to follow through on it.

Cezanne resides in Gerard’s drawings more in process than in image, but one can divine a link from her ruled forms to Cezanne’s insistence that nature be represented through cylinders, spheres and cones. Gerard goes about it in a reverse order—transforming fractious arrays of triangles, circles and the odd sloping contour into panoramic landscapes—of a sort, anyway. Though her diagrammatic structures create a certain perspective logic, space is developed more from the reinvention of individual shapes and the connections that accrue between them. Gerard’s compositions are malleable even as they achieve an elegant and scabbled resolution.

Gerard works on both white and black grounds, the latter to less convincing effect: their photonegative character seems overly dramatic for a draftsman as tight-lipped and pensive as this one. Then again, “Black Star” is irresistible not only because its lustrous surfaces recall Japanese woodblock prints, but because it comes off like an X-ray transcription of El Greco’s “View of Toledo.” Elsewhere, Gerard divines a hitherto unknown correspondence between Yellow Submarine and Sieneese painting—really, “Campo” is Sassetta on LSD—and, overall, provides an object lesson in why doubt, at least when it comes to art, can be a good thing.