

Art in America

October 1999



Stephanie Rose: *Portrait of John Ashbery*, 1997, oil on canvas, 64" by 53½ inches; at the Dactyl Foundation.

Stephanie Rose at the Dactyl Foundation

The six portrait paintings in this exhibition mark a new direction for Stephanie Rose, an artist better known for her abstract works. Completed between 1996 and 1998, the portraits are likenesses created from observation, memory and photographs.

Each subject stares out at the viewer in a way that conveys the moment of encountering a weighty persona with the freshness and ephemerality of a glance, but the result is elaborately worked and structurally complex. In *Limelight* (*Portrait of Melissa Errico*), the sitter's turbid blonde locks summon the powerful presence of a Medusa, but her pink skin suggests that she is flushed, a sign of vulnerability. She wears a crimson gown and stands before a red curtain with undulating lines that, combined with the curved shapes of a gold ornament, lend a degree of nervous energy to this baroque composition.

Rose varies the position of the subjects to good effect. The novelist and *A.i.A.* senior editor Ted Mooney, for instance, looks up from the lower part of the painting with a cheerless expression, as if sustaining a precarious balance between insouciance and regret. The gray background and his white shirt and tie accentuate the ashen quality of his hair and pallid skin.

Abstract elements also appear in the portraits. Embedded in each image is a second, smaller painting that seems to have been cut into the canvas. These sharply defined rectangles contain passages of brilliant color and abstract geometric shapes; they often feature landscape elements as well. In the *Portrait of John Ashbery*, a small inset panel contains a moonlit lake. It has a predominantly blue tone that contrasts with surrounding areas of warm color. Painted in elaborate detail, the face of the poet in this half-length portrait stands out as if caught by the flash of a camera. In the background, patches of thick gold paint create iridescent highlights on oak leaves, a truncated column and a lyre.

The largest painting on view, however, was the show's only abstract canvas. Titled *Late in the Day/Late in the Year* (1996), it testifies to the artist's involvement with abstract and painterly concerns. Covering

nearly the entire back wall of the gallery, the 9-by-10½-foot composition of primarily gray and gold includes references to ancient architecture. Dominating the left-hand portion of the canvas is a stylized Egyptian column which seems to teeter on the verge of collapse. Another prominent feature of the work is a thickly painted red swag, a motif that recurs in several of the portraits and that lent a theatrical tone to the entire exhibition.

—Gerard McCarthy