



Stephanie Rose, *Riddle*, 1989, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 69½" × 53".  
Courtesy E. M. Donahue Gallery.

## Stephanie Rose

The earliest painting in Stephanie Rose's recent exhibition, *Make Believe #5*, is her equivalent of Matisse's *Red Studio*. But Rose's is far from a limpid painting even though she defines a room through a picture on the wall, table top, and wallpaper composed of red-on-red marks. What we must deal with is a stockpile of brittle-looking abstract imagery; she draws her subsequent, more airy proto-narratives from harsh shapes such as are heaped here. But by setting this painting in a bounded room, Rose hints at her ambition. The rest of the show is the fabrication of a whole, wide actual world.

A major component of this world is what Rose calls "art since 1945." With her, the phrase names and has the force of a style and philosophy, but it also works to telescope time. Forty-five years ago seems like only last season. Its essence is the heroic breaking away of European dominance on art best exemplified by the mythological paintings of Jackson Pollock. The mark-making mode of these paintings, which led to the drip paintings, is the underpinning of Rose's current work. For example, *Make Believe #6* can read as a pastiche of classic Rothko, with bands or bars against a light-blue field. But this is only a partial reading, for at the bottom of the painting is a fluorescent shape which might read as a two-headed figure. It clues us in to Rose's

great affection for the underside of American culture—comics and cartoons. A cartoon idiom is pushed in the rest of Rose's current crop of paintings, not to bring down the high influence of "art since 1945," but to demonstrate that this hieratic mode has a rather gleeful flip side. *Make Believe #7* features images set against a fluorescent orange ground, chiefly a jagged-edge bulge that might have been inspired by one of Adolph Gottlieb's "bursts," although with Gottlieb the raggedy form is usually set below the other shapes rather than rode like a cloud as it is in Rose's painting.

*Make Believe #8* is a tondo. One approaches a tondo gingerly, for even though it is the most elementary of shaped canvases it is also the most radical. Its circularity has to be acknowledged and dealt with. My conservative instincts lead me to say that the tondo should have stopped with Raphael, with a neat folding together of Madonna and Child, but the tondo is also a shining shape for Rose. Since she is assaying the description of a bumptious world, the tondo signals an unstoppable rolling along. It is also amusing that in this tondo she attempts to check the inherent tendency of the shape to roll by weighing it down with a massive form reminiscent of an anvil. This form is counterpointed by one that is very light and free. Rose identifies it as a scroll, something that, in a classical age,

might be a motto like "Ars Longa Vita Brevis." But in Rose's hands the "scroll" reads more like a launched crepe-paper streamer, perhaps celebrating "artists since 1945."

A later tondo is something of a tour de force, for it ranges across a spectrum of possible meanings, oblivious to the round shape. The composition is dominated by a black form wielding something like a lobster claw but one is also beguiled by two small forms in red. We have a surprisingly identifiable figure, a tiny supine homunculus at the bottom rim of the circle and what might be either a complex, four-part digestive tract, or a linked set of cartoon word balloons near the center. We also have a scroll segment, elegant like the neck of a cello.

Forms which I have identified as word balloon amalgams gain increasing definition in *Three Duets* and *Lift*. They are also pointedly contrasted to the homunculus (on the bottom edge of both paintings) who here looks to be struggling for his existence. Since opposition has been identified as Rose's major mode of working—the contrast between abstract expressionism and the comics being the main one—we now have the heroism of "1945" against the primacy of the word in art for which one might now read conceptualism. The always-struggling art-making impulse is represented by the homunculus, but it is presided over by a symbol of death, the black barren figure. The flying scrolls, aggressively have nothing to say.

Always close by in Rose's work is the notion of theater, meaning that all the elements are purposeful and they follow a script. It is clear that archetypes are represented and acted out. With this in mind, *Riddle* asserts itself as obvious theater, with even a plush red "curtain" the length of the painting's right side. Our focus is on the face of the little man he is in fear. Instead of the components occupying separate zones, there is dramatic conflict with the "box" about to fall on him, like a safe.

The experience one has with Rose's new work is not one of neatly decoding her clearly contrasting elements. Its seamless flip flop from high art to low art meets the dichotomy of breakthrough (as in "art since 1945") meeting the "over-refinedness" of today. We have emotions and ideas resolve in Rose's pursuit of "mark-making," and finally we have abstraction versus figuration. Broad comedy is not new: Guston and Fälsstrom made high-art use of the comics, but as we follow the vicissitudes of Stephanie Rose's homunculus we have to smile at the one little man who has digested the past and who aims to lead us kicking and screaming into the '90s. (E. M. Donahue, October 4–31)

William Zimm