

Art in America

MARCH 2013



Stephanie Rose: *The Eternal Return*, 2009, Oil on canvas, 72 by 66 inches; at the Albany Institute of History & Art

ALBANY

STEPHANIE ROSE

Albany Institute of History & Art

In the early 1980s, Stephanie Rose, after working for 30 years as an abstract painter, introduced representational elements into her art, achieving a dramatic and colorful style that recalled the visual distinctiveness and eerily tinged humor of old-time animation. These works exploit the mysterious suggestiveness of homuncular shapes as well as Classical and totemic forms (pillars, drapery and figurative sculpture), which are deliberately contrasted with more abstract picture-within-the-picture passages, where the accent is on the gestural and the painterly.

In “The Eternal Return,” this exhibition of Rose’s portraits made between 1996 and the present, the artist has abandoned none of the playful vibrancy of her work from the ’80s. Her adult daughter was her first human subject (*Elizabeth: Portrait of Elizabeth Schub*, 1996), indicating the intimacy of her portrait project overall—a poignant sense of personhood that the artist respectfully explores.

Lee Dichter and *Sophie Dichter* (both 2010), for example, feature a number of Rose’s visual trademarks: scrolling blood-red fabric, luridly biomorphic chandeliers and busts of Roman gods. Yet the faces of her subjects stand out most distinctly, their wide-eyed gazes seeming to project a calm mixture of wariness, vulnerability and the concerns that are a part of any life. The surroundings are at once lush and haunted (in the case of *Lee*) or verdant and brackish (*Sophie*), expressive of vying abundance and decay. The equilibrium that her subjects muster, along with their emotional states, seem to be the mystery at which Rose drives.

The “eternal” of the exhibition’s title lies in the shared regard between artist and subject (or, more fundamentally, between human being and human being). This is clearest in the eponymous picture of her two grandsons, *The Eternal Return* (2009). The canvas includes the portrait of her daughter, hanging in the background above the older boy’s head, next to a doorway that seems to lead into some shining, blank unknown. The interpenetrating gaze between the artist and her family fills the manorial room depicted in the painting with a timeless charge. The presence of a bust of Minerva suggests the realm of the ideal, recalling in this emotionally rich context the traditional metaphysical dictum that nothing truly beautiful ever really dies.

The sculptural and totemic elements in Rose’s paintings seem to reference our ancient as well as our primitive pasts. They balance our vast cultural inheritance, including its alternately utopian and apocalyptic potentialities, with the fragile perspective of the solitary individual left to variously experience it.

Many of Rose’s subjects are artists themselves, which plays into the self-referential quality of these portraits. Their theatricality seems born from a recognition—both ludic and sympathetic—of the extent to which each of us is an actor, or a social construct. If artifice itself appears as Rose’s primary theme, it is the means by which she maintains her esthetic encounter with the all-sustaining if elusive incidence of the genuine.

—Tom Breidenbach