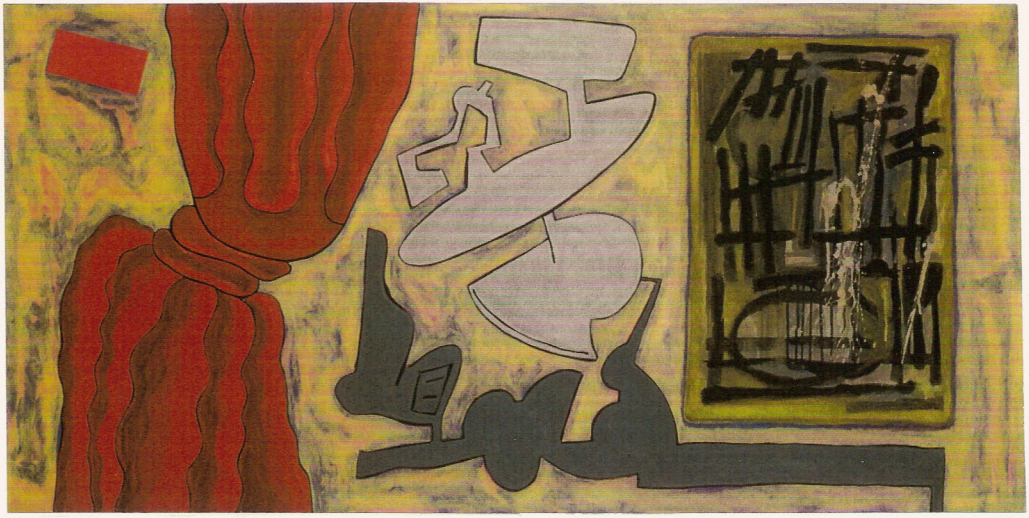

Stephanie Rose, *STILL PICTURES NO. 3,* **1993,** acrylic and oil on canvas, 40 x 80".

STEPHANIE ROSE

E. M. DONAHUE GALLERY

Stephanie Rose's "Still Pictures," 1993, are, first of all, a reminder that in terms of technique she is simply one of the best painters around. Luckily Rose's technical facility is at the service of a flamboyant imagination and a disciplined intelligence constantly bombarded by conflicting ideas. These very excited and exciting paintings create luscious harmonies out of unlikely dissonances, paintings in which the abstract is fused with the symbolic and allegorical: Jean Cocteau and Mark Rothko, Odilon Redon and Willem de Kooning.

Although diversely inventive, the paintings are all of a piece: sonnets to Orpheus illuminated by the neon of a diner. Rose is a very sophisticated, historically minded painter (so easily erudite that post-Modern, stylistic gamesmanship seems merely natural in her work), but she can also be downright funky. The center of *STILL PICTURE NO. 2*, for example, is occupied by a gray form like a cartoon ear attached to a writhing stem; to its left is a red, theatrical curtain (a recurring element that makes one ponder what marvellous sets Rose could design), and to its right is an extravagantly curvaceous form painted in Day-Glo pinks. Mere good taste, you will have gathered, is not high on Rose's list of priorities, but this outlandish pink form turns out to be an historical allusion that takes us all the way back to Pompeian wall painting, and beyond. It is unmistakably a lyre, and a lyre, in the Western tradition is inevitably the one that Orpheus abandoned and Apollo assumed.

The lyre is the central figure in a cluster of Orphic images that occurs in all but one of these paintings. Other elements of this cluster are Ionic volutes, Corinthian acanthus leaves, oak leaves, and broken column shafts. The Day-Glo lyre of *NO. 2* is exceptional. Elsewhere Rose presents this classical vocabulary in appropriately cool tones of gray, beige, light brown, and pale blue, but she also reduces it to a kind of allegorical rubble (which Walter Benjamin might have found intensely interesting), while, at the same time, revealing its magical capacity for metamorphosis—the way in which the curl of a leaf may become a volute, and how that, in turn, may become a purely abstract form.

Rose is telling us about history, and her fear that history will be lost. It is this fear that gives her paintings their intense and exhilarating harmony. Her Orphic image clusters are never seen in isolation. They are set against richly worked backdrops and juxtaposed with elements that allude to the entire history of American abstraction. In *NO. 5*, for example, the hectically jumbled Orphic images must coexist with two severe, black, totemic figures. Even more disconcerting is a bar of brilliant orange at the right-hand edge of the canvas, that is either an invasion from another space or a way out for the eye. It is a composition that should not work, but somehow Rose's fierce intelligence and sheer skill hold everything in balance. The same could be said of the equally handsome *NOS. 3*, 6, and 7. These paintings are an object lesson in how post-Modernism should be done: Rose's allusions to the past are never trivializing or exhibitionist, and her painterly virtuosity is always infused with passion and sensuality. It is to be hoped that this exemplary work will receive the attention it deserves.

—John Ash

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