

Stephanie Rose at E.M. Donahue

Stephanie Rose makes very large, bright, oil-and-acrylic paintings that are loaded with contradictions and are deeply appealing. This was her second show at this gallery, but she has exhibited frequently over the years. In the catalogue interview for this show, Rose places this new work on a continuum with her earlier paintings—a few adjustments have been made here, she says, mostly by reducing the number of shapes per canvas.

The imagery consists of loosely brushed cartoon figures—squishy, Pop, *Mad*-magazine freak-out shapes—presented in the midst of lush fields of color. The images suggest a story that isn't there; the overall effect is both abstract and symbolic. There's a new fullness to each of these canvases. They read as a conglomerated homage—to an eternal Pop present and a grand and still usable art past.

In *Quo Vadis*, an impinging crowd of unraveling gray scrolls and cartoony amoebas drawn in black, coming in on the right side of the canvas, bears a remarkable and humorous resemblance to the mass of figures in Picasso's *Guernica*. Surrounding and behind this incursion are grandly painterly layers of gold and red. There is a hint of a theater curtain at left, and a few biomorphic and geometric objectlike forms float about. In *Reveille*, the broad, loose strokes are abstract but somehow speechifying. At the bottom of this painting a Day-Glo pink figure is kicking away. It's reminiscent of a Keith Haring figure, but Rose's beings are not neo-primitive stand-ins for the "human community," as Haring's were. Rather, they are symbols for painting as the act of signing.

Rose seems to me to focus on the "phrasing" of art, the frequency at which certain kinds of tropes can come in or, once arrived, how they hold their place. All kinds of signs, abstract and otherwise, have equal weight. Each canvas functions like a stage on which many things can happen. Most of the paintings, in fact, are framed by a kind of proscenium. Geometric details—for instance, a mute stripe of blue—are used in a wry economical fashion, like labeling.

It seems almost beside the point to mention that a satirical critique of painting is at least part of what's going on here. Rose's floating elements—red columns, purple womblike objects with smaller nodes inside them—are part of a commentary on art's heroic and pathetic need to try to communicate. There is a stuttering quality to the inevitable reappearance of these mute objects in one golden canvas after another. *Time-Step* comes across as a great historical painting. It's dramatic yet tremendously vague. A scroll of lime green is pitched across an abstract background suggestive of burning cities and flaming skies. A white horse—a Pegasus—has star billing, tear-assing across all this paint and space as though forever. Much of the delight of this work comes from the fact that it carries lots of messages without ever burdening us with exactly what they are. Even so, one can hardly miss the fact that these works are about the history of painting.

—Eileen Myles



Stephanie Rose: *Time-Step*, 1990, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 by 66 inches; at E.M. Donahue.