

Art in America

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Stephanie Rose at Fiction/Nonfiction

For Stephanie Rose the mythic comprises something more fundamental than a trendy style or an image repository. Rose's paintings hover between abstraction and representation, containing a variety of suggestive forms that may be read as figures, landscape elements or quasi-mystical symbols. Her works have been called expressionist, and do owe something to such Abstract Expressionists as Kline, de Kooning and Pollock (especially in his pre-drip days). Nevertheless, Rose's work has less to do with the liberation of the unconscious and the celebration of individual sensibility than with an effort to convey reality in terms of psychological, metaphysical and natural forces. This is her connection with the mythic. In all cultures myths arise in an effort to explain and reconcile apparently basic, and irreconcilable, divisions in human experience—between spirit and matter, soul and body, or as it's often formulated, the gods and man.

Rose's work has always been marked by such dualities. A previous body of work was characterized by the pairing of figural elements, one gray, rocklike and immutable, the other fiery red and trembling. In this show a variety of oppositions was again present. *Conversation No. 2* features an intense blood-red ground upon which the artist has placed a pulsating central mass that has something of the quality of a Cubist still life gone biomorphic. Above this image hovers an off-white rectangle which contains a gray tombstone-like form.



Stephanie Rose: *High Places No. 3*, 1987, oil on canvas, 54 by 72 inches; at Fiction/Nonfiction.

In the turbulent surrounds, this element offers an island of formalist calm. A gold halo hovers to one side of the rectangle while the bottom left corner of the painting contains a green circle which has broken open to emit a purple stream.

One could read the painting as a meditation on the nature of art as either the realm of platonic ideals or the site of messy, elemental passions. The flaming red of the ground stands in inferno-like contrast to the celestial quietude of halo and rectangle, casting the painting's duality in a

quasi-religious light. Finally, the stream, and its watery connotations, offers a promise of regeneration which mitigates the sepulchral appearance of the gray form within the rectangle.

In this, as in other paintings in the show, Rose's carefully orchestrated oppositions suggest a vision fundamentally opposed to that of Western science, with its quest for a single, quantifiable basis for knowledge. Instead, Rose embraces the multiplicity of myth. In *Conversation No. 2*, the oscillation between turbulence and calm, between flame, matter

and liquid, suggests an affinity with the medieval division of phenomena into manifestations of earth, air, fire and water. In other works, the spirit world seems at odds with prosaic everyday reality.

However interpreted, all the paintings suggest an engagement between Apollonian and Dionysian forces. By refusing to resolve the conflict, or privilege one impulse over the other, Rose stakes out a position in which the artist acts as mediator between realms and varieties of experience. She reminds us that, before it came to signify private fantasy or heroic narcissism, myth was a means of reconciling self, others and world.

—Eleanor Heartney