

Art in America

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Stephanie Rose: *Nightfall*, 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 inches square; at Nicole Fiacco.



HUDSON, N.Y.

Stephanie Rose at Nicole Fiacco

In Stephanie Rose's paintings, lengths of bright red drapery billow into view from above or hover, sinuously swagged, along the upper edge of the canvas. Velvety in texture, they have the look of theater curtains. Curling, swooping and swirling, they gesture with the panache of actors on the stages they frame.

Other members of her pictorial cast include bars of color; flurries of intricate, non-figurative form; and chairs in various styles, from baroque to moderne, each evoking an individual personality. Now and then, Rose paints a portrait, an eerily precise likeness with a gaze of unsettling intensity. (This exhibition contained a recent portrait of the filmmaker Rebecca Dreyfus, whose face appears against a background of Rose's motifs.) Mostly, however, her tableaux are unpeopled. Yet they are rife with character—or characters, some of whom clash, as when a lime-green bar intrudes on a portion of space keyed to the ghostly blue of a chair with neoclassical lineaments. Tropical lushness, meet early-modern decorum.

With friendly effrontery, Rose has turned the flat devices of Cubism and collage into pictorial costumes for decidedly volumetric forms—major players in her theater of extreme self-consciousness. The action is in the

interchange between a painting's disparate parts, and of course there is no single denouement because every element interacts so complicatedly with every other.

In *Nightfall* (2004), two chairs—both rococo and flaming red—stand near the lower edge of the canvas. Or, one might say, they stand just across the imaginary footlights that make Rose's palette so vivid. Floating between these identical objects is a vertical bar of the same hot color. At first, it seems the bar is a kind of magnet, bringing the twin chairs together and giving them a symmetrical orientation, as if one were the other's reflection. Then another thought occurs: what if the red bar is not a uniting but a divisive force? Maybe it has split one chair into two, setting off a chain of divisions throughout the painting, where forms interact in an elegant frenzy of mirroring, though none of these other, less easily identifiable forms is the precise duplicate of any other. Whether resemblance is obvious or a stretch, the same difficulty arises: how to tell the original from its reflection. Who is who when everyone is somebody else?

And Rose often frames the image of a chair with a rectangle of brushy color—shades of Hofmann, with his thick slabs of pigment. I mean the painter Hans Hofmann, of course, but E.T.A. Hoffmann the writer of gothic tales also comes to mind, for there is a dark side to Rose's art. Now and then, exuberance turns manic around the edges. Space gets a case of the jitters, or a leading form, absorbed by its own complexities, is submerged in the shadow of solipsism. Yet light always triumphs, brilliantly, as the painter's wit induces even the most difficult forms to join the pictorial drama. —Carter Ratcliff