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Story Look

The Late Show has multiple views on the *Present Tense*.

By Debra Di Blasi

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Ask any caveman (or Rod Stewart) and he'll agree: Every picture tells a story. Sometimes two or three. Paintings presumably arose from the

impulse to communicate tales of the hunt, the gods and ordinary human existence. Over the millennia, visual storytelling -- whether cave or cathedral or canvas -- has transmuted countless times in countless fashions. But the impulse to tell remains constant, so much so that the term "narrative art" seems redundant. Yet without an audience, stories are nothing but muttering, and hearing them requires much more than physical presence. It requires thoughtful inquiry into the relationships between image and world, world and individual, individual and image in an expanding loop of reflective observation (which ideally leads to a healthy self-conscious).

The paintings of Gregory Eltringham and Fernando Orellana included in *Present Tense*, at The Late Show, are rich with potential narratives, and the patience required to hear them is well worth the time and effort. Although the artists approach their respective aesthetics from different directions, they arrive at destinations within shouting distance: Both allow the narrative to arise from the painting process.

Eltringham, for example, says he is "usually struck by a visual vision, something I'm going to be interested in working with in a purely visual sense. After that I start adding elements that will create the potential for narrative." Three of his eight oil paintings exhibited here -- "Tip," "Dear" and "Twist Tie" -- use his wife as that primary vision, resulting in what appears to be an exploration of gender as well as of the hunter and the hunted. At first glance, each of these finely rendered paintings resembles a traditional portrait, much like those staged in mass-market studios. But that's where the similarities end. Eltringham makes the main figure's gender ambiguous first by depicting it with a shaved head. (In the past -- and perhaps still today in some cultures -- shaving off a woman's hair was a form of punishment, a way to defeminize and thus strip identity.) The model also wears the traditional businessman's uniform of white shirt and necktie -- this one bright red, the same color as her lips.

But there's more to the story. This woman has antlers. In two works, they're made of wound white fabric spiraling upward; in "Dear," they appear to be real antlers attached with peach-colored bows to her smooth pate, while a feral green backdrop reinforces the link with nature. It's hard to ignore the wordplay, in which Eltringham mixes *dear*, a loved one, and *deer*, an animal preyed upon by humans and other animals. But the subject retains the forward-facing eyes of the predator, adding to the work's ambiguous reading.

Yet another element of ambiguity in "Dear" is a child (Eltringham's son) whose youth and nakedness -- except for a green paper crown askew on his head -- make gender anyone's guess. Contradicting his mother's erect and eerily confident pose,



Gregory Eltringham's "Dear"



Fernando Orellana's "Evil Olive"

Where:
The Late Show, 4222 Charlotte

Details:
Through November 25, 816-531-8044

Subject(s):

the boy slumps behind a stuffed animal he clutches, gazing not at the viewer but into some enigmatic future both fascinating and frightful.

Eltringham's son is the central figure in another series that strikes a pleasing balance between representational and nonrepresentational painting, and between the comically and somberly absurd. Naked except for an aviator's hat that resembles a hunting cap, the boy stands or sits in a yellow toy plane made of geometric blocks. Though the plane cannot possibly fly, Eltringham has it soaring above Hopperesque landscapes, the diminutive pilot reminiscent of kamikazes in World War II photos. In fact, although the artist says he executed the paintings this summer, the prescience of "A Tight Formation," composed of a trio of these implausible "bombers," is unavoidable. Further multiplying the potential narratives are the Xs and Os on the airplanes' wings, referencing both symbols for "hugs and kisses" in sentimental letters and tic-tac-toe, a game in which the outcome is usually a deadlock when adults play.

"The narratives I create are ambiguous to anyone who doesn't know me," says Eltringham, "and even to people who know me. I really just like to put together things that are really funny to me, even though many people don't see them that way." But, Eltringham adds, he knows he has a tendency to create "on a subconscious level that I'm obviously unaware of until someone points it out."

Fernando Orellana is more intentional in his search for the subconscious narrative. Unlike his more famous sculptures (technologically sophisticated painting machines that require careful planning and building), his paintings are primarily "conceived automatically on the canvas, with as few preconceived ideas as possible." Each painting begins with random scribbles and scratches; from these he'll find an image that is compelling enough to pursue to fruition, an endeavor that includes acrylic paint, sumi ink and a blow torch to create a bubbly surface texture.

"Because of this process," says Orellana, "I've noticed that over the years I have developed a sort of autobiographical narrative, tending to communicate what is happening in my life at the time."

Perhaps this is why his paintings result in a cohesive body of work -- regardless of their random beginnings. Each contains as its central image what appears to be a single figure: a simultaneously whimsical and creepy hybrid of a creature that looks like it never should have survived its mutation.

Take, for example, the figure in "Evil Olive." (All titles are palindromes, created *after* the paintings.) It resembles a fat cartoon creature made out of pillowcases or burlap sacks and reads like a visual palindrome -- or, as Orellana says, "a sort of symmetrically mutated nightmare." It has uselessly little arms; too many eyes, disproportionately small like a whale's; and three orifices that resemble, respectively, a purple anus, a teeth-gritting mouth and a welcoming vagina. Slithering out of the anus and vagina is a worm-like phallus or tongue, probing the world for information or perhaps imparting its own information upon it. These images, along with binary dice and neckties and bottles or glasses of what appear to be booze, reappear in the other paintings, presenting the viewer with iconography that must be read, compiled and interpreted in order to achieve meaningful narrative. And that narrative is literally anyone's conjecture.

Because Orellana sees no difference between the human and the machine, the creatures in his paintings seem illustrative of both, *Homo machinas* that are somehow a less-than-ideal ideal: a productive/producing machine that is a little scary because of its tendency to be relentlessly uncontrollable. To be clear, this is not necessarily the artist's story, for he takes an embracing view of future technology. "I believe that the machine is the next evolutionary step for the human species," says Orellana, "the 'natural' collective offspring of the human condition."

But this is what is so gratifying about interpreting art: A multitude of stories squats inside every work. Some spill intentionally from the artists, some sneak from their subconscious, others arise from the viewer's own context. All are valuable -- perhaps critical -- in the quest for a truly civilized world.