

Meg Madison BY JACQUELYN DAVIS

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Kristi Engle Gallery, Los Angeles CA January 13 • February 17, 2007

Meg Madison

Dissecting a major American cultural icon that has outlived its usefulness, Meg Madison's "12.26" takes a rather surgical approach to the contemporary sublime. At Kristi Engle's downtown gallery, Madison shows photographs of day-old Christmas trees abandoned on suburban streets, rotting in dumpsters, battling with lobster-clawed leaf mulchers, or lying about in vacant recycling lots on Randall's Island waiting to be interred. Originally drawn to Christmas trees because of their inherent emotional and symbolic content, over time Madison has shifted from standard Hallmark shots to these despoiled harbingers of obsolescence, imbuing the once-fabled trees with whimsical hope and compassion. Though her renderings could be dismissed as bittersweet one-liners, there's always the chance that viewers may be cajoled into taking their civic duties more seriously.

These "12.26" exhibits range from an oversized, vertically segmented photograph of a solitary tree thrown into a Griffith Park dumpster, a crime-scene-inspired cluster of sepia-toned snapshots of assorted abandoned trees, to a stark diptych showing the after-effects of a holiday spent building monuments to defunct mythologies only to wipe the slate clean and blindly start over again. Aptly, these paradigmatic "green victims" are unable to speak to their own petty conundrum, but they easily evoke larger notions of a society now apparently inured to the future consequences of its past and present actions. Like all those caught up in such seasonal festivities, people today seem transfixed by the mystique of transient existence, having become incapable of



accepting accountability for anything solid or real.

Can any advanced nation continue to exist in effigy of one of its principal icons? The annual fate of Christmas trees itself makes a prickly comment on somewhat incongruous religious beliefs and rituals, whose ancient socio-cultural rationale has long since been shed. Indeed, Madison's homily can offer genuine catharsis to those searching for a convenient emblem of America's sliding living standards and its recent moral or judicial torpor. But these trees go much further, triggering an edgy, Seuss-like assault on conservative social values with high Hegelian overtones of the Fall of Man. Such stubbornly regenerative acts seem a premonition of heavier, less festive vicissitudes to come.

Nathan Hylden BY ITZA VILABOY

Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles CA February 10 • March 10, 2007

Nathan Hylden

"Again and as if to begin," Nathan Hylden's debut show at Richard Telles, displays a combination of untitled objects ranging from paintings, collage, sculpture, and ephemera, altogether unified by a tightly knit set of formal preoccupations and themes. Despite the limited palette—black, white, and neon orange—Hylden's skillful yet playful variations do not feel restricted or monotonous. What emerges from observing the paintings in close succession, say, is a marked departure from paint as such toward the painting process itself, in which the brushstroke has now devolved into overlapping zones of density. In one set—the black-on-black acrylics on linen—the surface facture has actually been systematically sculpted out to form a reflective sheen, in muted contrast to the more even finish of their underlying supportive layers.

Although this layering effect might suggest a rather conceptual approach to painting, here it appears to have more to do with the gesture of revealing an absent concept behind every conceptual/retinal form of recurrent patterning. In fact, Hylden almost flaunts

the fullness of this empty gesture, adroitly negotiating hard-edged borders, odd canvas threads, and angled convergences of line. Further to this conceit are nine collage and painted works on paper arranged in even rows of three. These black-framed newspaper cutouts, which depict an ongoing construction site where several figures can be seen erecting the wooden skeletal frame of a house, are invariably sliced through with recurring vectors or strokes, causing interference patterns less tessellated than just indiscernibly there. It slyly insinuates the very act of collage as a form of nonrepresentational abstraction.

The next, somewhat larger and intense cluster of paintings alters viewer perception by turning eye movements into gestures themselves. The shallow-to-extreme-orange hues fill out the canvas volume through columnar arrangements of hatching, all intermeshed by the degree to which they overlap or don't. It is as if painting can no longer be beheld, beholden to, or kept at a distance in the traditional pictorial sense, having now transmuted into a pure distance of always emergent, eye-catching forms. Just as one should view the black paintings at an angle to grasp their precise edge-to-edge placement, so the same goes for the larger set, but with a minor (and major) qualification. For, looking back from the opposite end of the gallery, what in fact appear as smudgy, broken-up and twisted outlines of these colorful shapes are but mere reflections in two polished aluminum sculptures diagonally placed across the middle of the room. Looking back toward the gallery entrance, however, only two white folded screens remain, forging a discreet if effective break in visual perambulation. These vector-like monochromes lend substance to the shadowy hallway, momentarily blanketing the installation in a wall of whiteness.

