

DISTILLING LIFE: THE PAINTINGS OF ELLEN BERMAN

Ellen Berman loves challenges. She must, because she tackles the most venerable genres in painting. Beginning with the still life, she moved into portraiture, and now it appears is nudging on into interiors and the landscape. Over the past twenty years Ellen has moved from watercolor to oil paint, from paper to canvas and board, from small scale to large scale and somewhere in between. Her palette has moved from realistic to somber to vibrant. She has physically moved from urban Houston to rural Texas Hill Country Wimberley.

The result is a body of oil paintings produced over the past several years in her studio in the trees with titles that suggest still lifes, but contents that include and imply much more. Her portraits of 1984 –1994 were emotionally and psychologically charged discoveries and explorations of herself, her husband David and her daughter Sarah. They were life-sized and dramatically lit. Color was true to life. Her still lifes of that period were in watercolor close to scale and realistic in color. With the loss of her daughter the portraits ceased and *memento mori* became the replacement for a short while. These were followed by a series of somber relatively dark, almost monochromatic, still lifes in oil.

The move to central Texas has produced a major shift in the work. There continue to be still lifes in oil, but everything has changed. Although the size of the work remains in the middle range (22" x 22" for the smallest to 30" x 60" for the largest) the scale of the objects in the paintings is always larger than life. As a result we see the objects in a new light. At a larger scale they take on personas they never had in "reality." Relationships take on new meanings. Bowls and pitchers converse and cavort, eggplants and persimmons huddle, lemons mill about outside a family compound, pears pair-up, a Boteroesque pitcher pushes at the confines of the canvas. In addition, a new dialog is established with the introduction of fabrics. All of the hardness and roundness of ceramic and produce has been replaced by the softness of cloth. Striped cloth undulates across the space creating a magical landscape. The cherries on two tablecloths replace the actual fruit on the other canvases. Most significantly, flowers and leaves on a tablecloth inside the studio could easily have blown in from the trees pictured through the window outside. And therein lies the greatest departure in the work. Through the introduction of the interior and exterior by the use of reflection – an overhead light fixture, a distorted window view – or the actual depiction of the world outside, Ellen has given us context. We are in a place. A place in the woods. A studio with lights and windows. A room with colorful objects caringly positioned and carefully and thoughtfully rendered. A lovingly distilled life beautifully presented.

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