

GEORGE ADAMS GALLERY

T 212.644.5665

41 West 57th Street New York, New York 10019

F 212.644.5666

www.artnet.com/gadams.html

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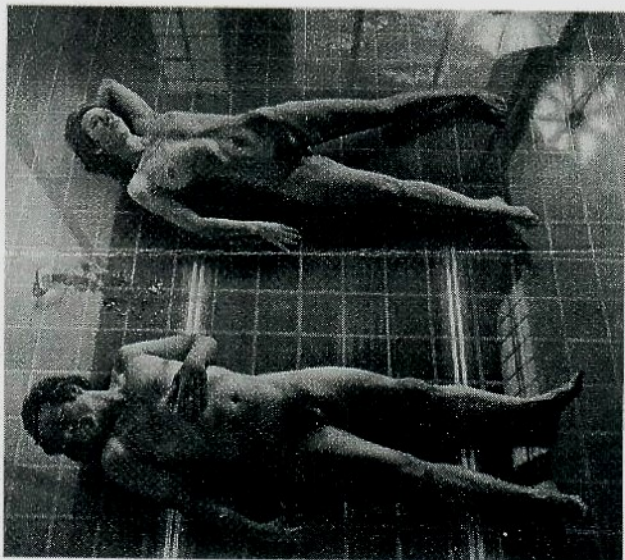
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James Valerio at George Adams

The wary expression and side-long gaze of James Valerio's minutely observed graphite self-portrait (1998) indicates that while the artist's torso is exposed, his consciousness is not. This show offered four large paintings and 10 still-life and figure drawings made by the well-known Chicago realist between 1974 and 1998. What's intriguing is the contradiction they embody: Valerio's sharp-focus rendering promises full disclosure, but the works are notably ambiguous.

Two Models on Studio Floor (1998) recalls William Beckman's signature paired male and female nudes, but we look down on these two as they enigmatically lie on glossy, reflective tile, their heads turned away from each other, jagged shards of a broken glass and spilled amber liquid between them. Beyond that fabulously painted flesh and floor, what is going on here? In *Dandelion Dream* (1995), two good-looking nudes are seen inexplicably levitating and tumbling within shiny satin comforters outdoors. These works are neither psychologically bizarre enough to be surrealist nor dark enough to be expressionist; in fact, their emotional inaccessibility makes them merely frustrating. They seem principally to serve as pretexts allowing Valerio to display his virtuosic rendering of disparate surfaces.



James Valerio: *Two Models on Studio Floor*, 1998, oil on canvas, 90 by 100 inches; at George Adams.

Yet *Frances* (1974), a large painting of an obese nude woman seated in a bedroom, engrosses the mind as much as Valerio's self-portrait does. The model's sharply painted bellies, rippling cellulite and dense network of varicose veins on gargantuan thighs are both horrifying and fascinating. Certain features of this portrait recall Manet's *Olympia* (1863): the subject's intelligent if guarded expression that frankly acknowledges the viewer, the flowers around her, and her mules. At the same time, the Madonna is evoked by the blue of her robe as well as by the flowers. A mirror, connoting vanity, is tilted up to give an off-kilter reflection of a window, a rather blunt cue of a topsy-turvy world. But in this 25-year-old work, Valerio presents a smart dame seemingly able to handle it.

To the extent that this small

group of works can be taken as representative, it suggests increasing attention by Valerio to the illusionistic rather than the metaphorical possibilities of painting. Some may find such technical spectacles enduringly delightful; for me, they're transient. A title like *Evasive* (a 1995 drawing of the head of a woman with her eyes averted) suggests that Valerio knows that behind all his apparent realism, on some level he's been hiding, and that his challenge is to extend authorial scrutiny beyond his seductive mantle of delicately stroked salt-and-pepper chest hair.

—Suzaan Boettger

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