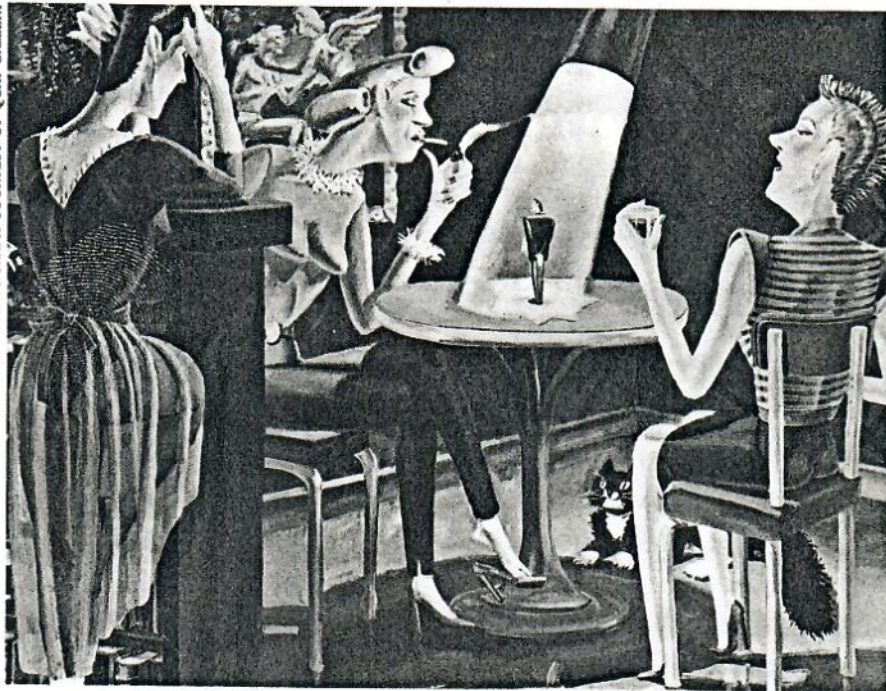


LABORS OF LOVE

Louise Stanley satirizes modern romance

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF QUAY GALLERY



The awful truth about love: In Stanley's 'Homage to a Perfect Man,' three tough women discuss the man of their dreams. He appears in the center of the table, but only as a tuxedoed doll.

Neither true love nor high art is ordinarily a laughing matter. Both are customarily approached with serious passions that blissfully blind one to the quotidian struggles involved in attaining them. Painter Louise Stanley, however, is able to puncture

the heady illusions about both love and art. Her colorful narratives on view at the Quay Gallery this month twist the sacred subjects into sardonic caricatures that expose the awful truths about each.

A pretty blond floozie in a fuzzy angora sweater (which emphasizes her pointy bosom) squats on the sidewalk to pick up miscellaneous trinkets that have spilled from her handbag. A suave junior-executive-type crouches next to her to help her out. Gossamer alter egos emerge from behind each, swooning backward, clutching their hearts. Stanley calls this sophomoric fantasy of a fateful encounter *Love at First Sight, or Direct Hit*. The artist's satirical exaggeration of the impact of "true love" is embellished by her obviously sophisticated control of painting. She juxtaposes dense hues and veils of sheer transparency demonstrating her finesse with oils. With her brush, she skillfully creates revealing caricatures of the love-struck. The composition as a whole conveys a whole chain of ideas into one pregnant image, which, as art historian E. H. Gombrich pointed out in reference to cartoons, is the essence of wit.

Aside from their superficial resemblances to cartoons, Stanley's wacky anecdotes suggest emotional complexities that evoke a sense of irony rather than silliness. A blond in pink lingerie and a fellow in green boxer shorts, both using fists and pillows, vigorously slug a tousled cupid cowering between them. Their bedroom is strewn with stockings, empty liquor bottles and a profusion of the spent and broken arrows of love. The painting is titled *Cupid Chastised or The Morning After*.

While such screwball comedies burlesque the foibles of romantically entwined couples, others parody distinctly female perceptions. A few suggest answers to the timeless male question, What do women want?

In *Homage to a Perfect Man*, three tough ladies gather around a chrome dinette table, sipping bourbon, smoking cigarettes, chatting. They wear skintight pants, pencil-slim skirts, ostrich froufrou at collars and wrists, spike heels. Their elegant elongated limbs and torsos and angular shoulders suggest that these made-up dames learned of glamour from '40s movies, as all of Stanley's characters apparently have. Despite their hard-boiled worldliness, they indulge in a favorite occupation of women (for at least part of the time) when they get together—discussing men. In this painting, a male is captured under the beam of a spotlight in the middle of the table, where the women are gathered. But the hero is only a doll in a tuxedo, a projection of their imaginations, a wishful composite of what a male could be, if only. . . .

And then there is the ultimate fantasy in the life of a lonely single woman. A voluptuous "Cosmo girl" type has been ironing clothes. A long deserted road stretches into the distance outside the window of her cozily wallpapered bungalow. The ribbons of steam puffing from the iron turn toward her, and magically the steam forms into a muscular he-man straight out of *Playgirl*, who clasps her in an enveloping embrace. A spray bottle tips off the ironing board, and even the table lamp's china figurines are

painted with startled gestures to accentuate the fantastic caprice. Called *Jupiter and Io*, the painting also refers to the myth in which Jupiter disguises himself as a cloud to hide from his jealous wife.

Yet, if the insight underlying these satires on romance intimate the personal sources of their inspiration, the East Bay artist also brings her trials as a painter into the picture. *Artist Being Attacked by Hostile Piece of Paper* portrays a reversal of the image of a zealous artist "attacking" her materials. Here, the unruly canvas buckles and will not lie flat despite the frantic maneuvers of the artist who, clad in stretch pants, bends over the drawing board as her frightened cat, hair on end, stares at the mysteriously agitated sheet. This scene conveys the difficulties Stanley encountered as a watercolorist, when changes in the substances used to size watercolor paper prevented her from obtaining the luminous washes she had been known for. She turned to gouache and oils, opaque materials with very different technical demands.

The vibrancy of the oils in the current exhibition, however, demonstrates that Stanley has successfully adapted her technique to the new medium, achieving once again a fluid luminosity. And although her subject matter may shatter some illusions about love and art, it offers wry insights into the foibles of such modern romances.

• Suzaan Boettger

Paintings by Louise Stanley

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Quay Gallery

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