

Valerio's Allegorical Realism

Deceptively naturalistic in manner, James Valerio's large-scale paintings imbue meticulous depictions of daily life with an almost religious sensibility.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

Realism is one of those apparently self-evident concepts that disintegrates under scrutiny. Chuck Close's minute examination of faces leads to abstraction; Magritte's matter-of-factly represented everyday objects are pressed into the service of mental conundrums. Even the 17th-century Dutch still-life painters—those über-empiricists—had eschatological ambitions. When it comes to realism, paradoxically, what you see is *not* what you see.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the work of Chicago painter James Valerio, whose virtuoso landscapes, figure studies and still lifes are grounded in concrete, deeply convincing detail. Underneath all his verisimilitude, however, lurks a sense of deeper mysteries, replete with unseen connections, half-conscious analogies and allegorical overtones.

The pièce de résistance in Valerio's recent exhibition at George Adams Gallery in New York was a roughly 6-by-7-foot canvas titled *Wilmette Night (Pat's Convalescence)*, 1999. Painted in nocturnal blue-black tones, it depicts Valerio's wife stretched out in a blue bathrobe on a daybed before a window. One of her hands lightly holds a rubber-tipped aluminum cane that rests upon her body, pointing down toward her outstretched bare feet. Light from an unseen source picks out the edges of her fingers and the jagged pattern of her rumpled bed sheets. Her expression is impassive and her eyes are half open—as if caught somewhere between wakefulness and sleep. In pose and demeanor she has the gravitas of a medieval tomb sculpture.

This otherworldly quality is enhanced by the play of images in the windows above her. Glimpses of bare trees and suburban backyards outside (Wilmette is a Chicago suburb) mingle with interior reflections of side tables crowded with medicines and toiletries. Inside and outside merge as bottles and jars seem to float unanchored amid tangled branches. Confined within the window frame, this complex amalgam becomes an image of worldly flux contrasting sharply with the quiet immobility of the recumbent figure.

Two monumental still-life paintings contain much the same air of

James Valerio: Wilmette Night (Pat's Convalescence), 1999, 72 by 90 inches. All works oil on canvas. Photos this article courtesy George Adams Gallery, New York.







portentous unreality. *Still-life with Melons* (1997-99), picturing a table laden with fruit and decorative glassware, makes clear reference to the Dutch tradition of the memento mori. Against a floral-patterned curtain, the cloth-draped table holds succulent pears, apples, lemons, oranges and watermelons. Most are whole, but a knife rests on one bisected lemon, while an orange has been peeled, revealing its moist, overripe flesh. At one end of the table a sliced watermelon exposes its brilliant red interior. As in the work of masters like Pieter Claesz., whole and cut fruits simultaneously reference eros, fecundity and decay.

Even more explicitly allegorical is *Monkey Still-life* (1994), a view of a pantry that is replete with allusions to life, death and mortality. A white glass-fronted cabinet on the wall seems borrowed from some Renaissance *wunderkammer*. Its curiosities include a skull, an iridescent nautilus shell, several doll heads, a burning can-

dle and what appears to be a human face resting on a crumpled sheet of aluminum foil. Protruding into the picture from above, presumably from an unseen light fixture, is a dangling length of string that ends in a nooselike loop.

Things are just as strange, if less obviously so, on the countertop below, where glistening porcelain bowls and wicker baskets hold ripe fruit. A plate offers sections of shriveled citrus, again conveying both sexuality and decay. A knife cuts into a luminous peach, several flowers have been uprooted and droop over the edge of the counter like dying damsels. An old pocket watch has been affixed to the wall—a reminder of time passing. Meanwhile, in the center of the painting, hanging from the cabinet, is a carved Balinese monkey demon presiding over all like a malevolent spirit. It's an unsettling scene—almost normal at first glance, but yielding successive layers of symbolism on closer observation.

In sharp contrast to such overt allegory is the recent painting *Studio Exit* (2003), which makes a dingy interior look oddly beautiful and compelling. Valerio carefully reproduces the surfaces of the stained cinder-block wall, peeling white door and scuffed wooden table. A mop propped against the doorframe rests in a swirling mass of dirty water on the gray concrete floor. The painterly sweep of the filthy liquid is oddly exhilarating, providing a gestural counterpoint to the tightly controlled brushwork that characterizes the rest of the canvas. Another note of suppressed hedonism appears in a bundle of pink fabric hanging on the wall. Its creases twist and curl like sinuous flesh.

In all these paintings an unnatural stillness coexists with an air of expectancy, a sense that something marvelous or unexpected could shatter the calm at any moment. In this respect, *Chicago* (2002) seems the most

The painterly sweep of dirty water in *Studio Exit* provides a gestural counterpoint to the work's tightly controlled brushwork. A pink cloth adds a note of suppressed hedonism.



Above, Still-life with Melons, 1997-99, 96 by 84 inches.

Right, Studio Exit, 2003, 96 by 84 inches.

Left, Chicago, 2002, 60 by 72 inches.

Below, Monkey Still-life, 1994, 84 by 72 inches.



personal. Here the artist (as the exhibition's catalogue tells us), wearing a shiny, yellow baseball jacket with "Chicago" stitched in red on the back, surveys his hometown from a rooftop. The view is not of the standard Chicago skyline in which gleaming skyscrapers rise like the Emerald City from the glassy expanse of Lake Michigan. Instead, we look across a stretch of low brick buildings and rooftops to a distant horizon punctuated by a few distinctive building silhouettes. The late-afternoon sun rakes across the upper portions of the brick apartment houses and picks up the satiny shimmer of the artist's jacket, giving the whole painting a slightly melancholy air. The streets below are already shrouded in shadow, and the figure's head does not break above the urban environment into the luminous sky above. Despite his rooftop vantage point, he remains solidly earthbound.

Valerio's work exhibits an almost religious sensibility, one that seems to accept the Christian notion that the eternal realm can be viewed through the veil of ordinary visible reality. Realism seems a slightly disreputable category these days—perhaps because it is too easily replicated and manipulated by digital technology. Nevertheless, the old-fashioned rendering of the external world by brush or pencil still holds a certain fascination. In Valerio's hands, realism goes further, reminding us that the intangible is only comprehensible through the prism of the world we see. □

"James Valerio: Paintings 1993-2003" was on view at George Adams Gallery, New York [Apr. 3-May 31, 2003]. An accompanying catalogue includes an essay by John Arthur.

Author: Eleanor Heartney is a freelance critic based in New York.