

GLADSTONE

Peter Eleey, "Karen Kilimnik," *The Brooklyn Rail*, Summer 2002



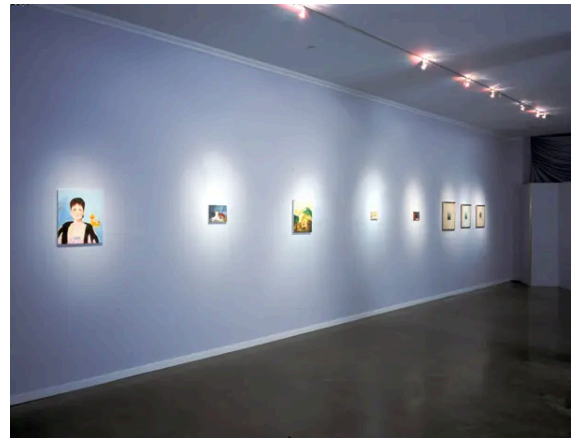
Karen Kilimnik

By Peter Eleey

Karen Kilimnik has been painting for a number of years now in the dialectical area between romanticism and irony, a tenuous relationship of interest to an increasing number of artists. Her most recent show once again showcases small paintings and photographs that seem to have been made by a regressive and obsessive teenage girl somewhere in rural America. Indeed, the pastel walls and white moulding employed in the gallery's front room brought to mind an adolescent's bedroom, while lending the pieces an historical air that furthered the artist's desperate romanticism.

The problem here is that viewers are asked to indulge the work's poor craftsmanship as an essential component of the artist's project. It is true that this has been part of Kilimnik's practice even before the art establishment more recently began to welcome (some would say actively seek) artists employing a more homemade/outsider/untaught aesthetic. And while one could perhaps attribute the stale feel of this show to the current preponderance of badly-made work around New York, it is hard to get excited by this exhausted and finally pretentious brand of work that revels in the bad drawing of fame- and fairytale-focused teens.

The larger issue lurking behind this discussion is the inherent political problem that often afflicts art that borrows stylistic conventions from outsider art. It makes its appeal as more "honest" and less informed, no doubt motivated in part by the large traveling survey of self-taught American art from a few years ago, and Madison Avenue's subsequent peddling of artists from that exhibition, but dating back at least to early modernist fetishism of African art. Art school MFAs who self-consciously use this material without a focused agenda necessarily touch upon the sticky questions of class (and often race) that surround an aesthetic identified with artists who were often mentally ill, poor, or simply ignored by the high-art establishment of which these artists are trying to



Karen Kilimnik, installation at 303 Gallery, 2002. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

become a part. Kilimnik's appropriation avoids these political problems—she impersonates what could easily have been herself at an earlier age, borrowing from a culture that feels native to her relative background—falling instead into an aesthetic haughtiness. It is frustrating to see more and more paintings by artists who want so badly to be unabashed romantics but who shamefully feel the need to check their presumably unfashionable desires with a variety of ironic techniques. The romantic re-popularization of the figure, for example, (led by bashful romantic John Currin), occurred through beautiful, well-crafted paintings that undercut their visual sincerity with a combination of anatomical fictions—which, for a while, felt like an honest underlining of the way in which commercial imagery has corrupted the sanctity of the body. Kilimnik's deadpan dumbness, on the other hand, begs the enemies of serious art to once again raise their voices to ask why their children couldn't make this stuff in school, with less and less aesthetic credibility with which to defend itself. It is hard to understand why anyone would want to look at, nevermind live with, bad copies of bad Impressionist paintings, unless they were done by your own children.

None of this is to suggest that the paintings are wholly without merit. The artist's use of water-based oil paint both gives the works an interesting surface and more coyly suggests the uncomfortable middle-ground of adolescence, playing a kind of dress-up with materials. This is a smarter and less obvious way into the subject matter, using kitsch without picturing it. A few of the portraits pull off an ephemeral conjuring similar to the best Elizabeth Peyton canvases, radiating a seductive internal light. Whatever encouraging moments one can find among the paintings, however, are obliterated by the artist's snapshot photographs of Madison Square Park and dead birds and squirrels on the road, complete with the camera-imposed date imprint. The utter silliness of these animal portraits is made clear by titles like "Just Resting" and "Snitch," pushing the infantile reading of death as sleep or punishment. As is too often the case in Kilimnik's art, the meat of this project is explained outside the works themselves. She would be better served to see these conceptual remnants as the adolescent props they so often are, instead of the intellectual justification they are assumed to be—and instead, free her imagery and technique from the ironic constraints of these faux-naïf fetishes. The argument might be that she's not being ironic, that all of this is intended sincerely and seriously. But it doesn't look fun anymore, which suggests it's probably time to grow up.