

Brooks allows viewers to fill in details in her opulent paintings

By Steve Bennett | December 1, 2014 | Updated: November 28, 2014 5:10pm

In Kimberly Brooks' recent paintings, filmy, opulently dressed figures from another age float in silk-draped salons and leafy estate landscapes.

Like a cinder caught in the mind's eye, their facelessness fires our imagination — much as we internally draw characters while reading dusty novels, filling in our own details.

"I love the unfinished," said the forty something Los Angeles painter, whose exhibition "I Have a King Who Does Not Speak" continues through Jan. 14 at the Roosevelt Library, 311 Roosevelt Avenue, on the near South Side. "It's always the areas of a canvas that are least finished that I'm most attracted to. I have to resist the urge to complete."



Brooks, an English major at UC Berkeley, calls on literature, history, theater, portraiture and abstraction to create her cryptic visual narratives (see "The Myth of What Happened by the Tree and the River"), which tweak memories that remain just out of reach, like thoughts on the tip of the tongue.

Paintings such as "Parlour Room" are sumptuous and mysterious. Sunlight sweeps into a dark-paneled room from large windows, creating dancing patterns on the floor, yet leaving a standing figure — a woman in a long scarlet-colored dress — in shadow. And who is the kneeling figure in the foreground?

"I wanted to capture the feel of mahogany and velvet and iron," Brooks said.

Paint runs and loose brushstrokes are evident in "I Was There and It Was Devine," a scene of ghostly women in a ballroom. Brooks conjures a melancholy sense of a wonderful evening winding down — and all these women are going home alone.

"I wanted to capture the mood of silk in that painting," Brooks said.

She explains her work as "resuscitating the memory of some great moment and holding it still."

The title of the exhibition refers to those voices from art history that speak to contemporary artists — whether they want to hear them or not. Painters as varied as Courbet and Dali echo in Brooks' work.

"As each painting teeters between abstraction and representation, Brooks' work touches on her own understanding of how painters see and process the visual remnants of history," said exhibition curator Alice Carrington Foltz. "It's like taking something old and bringing it back to life. And I just love the way she applies paint. A dress can be a few brushstrokes. It's almost transparent, but the colors are so rich. That's hard to do. And of course I love the way she is able to leave spaces for the viewer to fill in."



Florida artist and curator Bruce Helander, who recently organized a Brooks show at Arthouse 429 in West Palm Beach, said Brooks creates "guilty pictorial pleasures."

In an essay on Brooks' art, Helander wrote that she "lays down an eccentrically handsome collection of quasi-surrealist strokes inducing the sensation of reliving a vintage portrait snapped from another time, like a recollection of sitting next to a dapper dinner guest at a black-tie event and wondering about his ancestry."



The centerpiece of "King Who Does Not Speak" is undoubtedly "Unknown Ancestor," a portrait of a vaguely Victorian woman in a white dress reclining in an outdoor setting rendered in wild brushstrokes that evoke an emotional physicality over what is a calm setting. Two small strokes evoke eye sockets, and that's all we get of the face.

"When we read, we create pictures in our minds," Brooks said. "And usually your mind will be pregnant with scenes from someone else's memory. I want to acknowledge my own imagination while creating images that allow viewers to fall into them and create memories from their own imaginations. It's the lack of clarity in the work that moves me."



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