

Darren Murray - Reviews: Dublin

Philip Auslander

KEVIN KAVANAGH GALLERY

Need a vacation? Maybe Darren Murray can help you out. The titles of all but one of the six paintings in his exhibition "Constructed for Leisure" contain words or phrases like PEACEFUL, SERENE, and GET AWAY-FROM-IT-ALL: the rhetoric of travel brochures. The works offer glimpses of tranquil destinations presented in a highly conventionalized style that reminds us of the extent to which our concepts of peace, serenity, and escape, as well as the things we do in pursuit of them, are now defined by standardized representations and reliably homogeneous encounters.

Murray's uniform formats (medium-sized squares and large rectangles), flat areas of color, and limited palette give his paintings something of the look of designs created for reproduction. The titles of the three square paintings are variations on a theme--Amankila, Peaceful Hill; Amanjiwo, Peaceful Soul; and Amanwanna, Peaceful Forest (all works 2002), named after vacation spots owned by Amanresorts, a company that markets packaged tropical tranquility--and the paintings themselves are very similar to one another: They look like designs on Hawaiian shirts. Each shows stereotypically "tropical" leaves and bamboo stalks with other foliage rendered over it in red, blue, lavender, pale yellow, and green over a red or blue ground. The vegetation appears at the sides of the image, framing flat areas of background color: a generalized ideal of a lush, tropical paradise. Fill in the blank. A hill is as good as a mountain, as long as it's exotic, restful, and soul soothing.

The three rectangular paintings are landscapes: An Alpine Landscape, Serene Japanese Temple Garden, and a range of unspecified mountains or glaciers. Each appears against the same red or blue ground as in the tropical fantasies. Again the vistas are framed by foliage, but this time the blanks have been filled in--though the mountains, a chalet, and a Japanese temple are sketched in like mirages rather than real things. These images, too, are interchangeable tourist archetypes whose location and identity are irrelevant to the experience they are supposed to provide the weary traveler. But it would be a mistake to overemphasize the cultural commentary in Murray's work. His paintings are more than just ironic simulated travel posters. The compositions are balanced, his line economical and supple. He conjures the Alps with just a few strokes, in the manner of traditional Japanese ink drawings. Through the title of the show, Murray presented these paintings self-consciously as designed objects, and they evoke a tension between the very real pleasures and satisfactions of good design and the questionable extension of designed experience to every aspect of human life.

Small realistically painted birds appear in each of the paintings--they are the most real-seeming things in them. In one landscape, A pair of Whitethroats get away-from-it-all, two little birds sit on branches looking out at a magnificent vista rendered in distinctly unnatural reds and pinks. The birds, as tourists, are surrogates for the viewers. But they have a relationship to these environments that we can never have. They are at once visitors and natural parts of the places they visit. And their presence does not disrupt the integrity of the places they enter as ours does. The irony in Murray's work is thus tempered by melancholy: His paintings refer to imaginary constructions of real places whose function is to promote their exploitation, but those constructions are also indices of our desire for a peaceful world we know does not, for us, exist.

COPYRIGHT 2002 Artforum International Magazine, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2002 Gale Group