

March 2011

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

PHILEMONA WILLIAMSON

JUNE KELLY

The new paintings in Philemona Williamson's recent exhibition, "Fractured Tales," presented the viewer with an uncertain narrative. Five round works on canvas (all 30 inches in diameter) on one side of the gallery faced six 48-by-60-inch canvases on the other. All the pieces were linked by subject—the staring faces and sometimes awkwardly active bodies of prepubescent children, most of them girls—and the careful layering of paint to achieve glowing, jewel-like tones, which highlight a budding sensuality. Williamson's repetition of standardized formats created the sense of an illustrated book.

In the tondos, children's faces are set against flat backgrounds of rich color in compressed, claustrophobic spaces. The figures are surrounded by objects, some domestic (quilts, chairs, cupcake liners) and some strange (shrunken heads that don't quite look like dolls). These works hint at a form of heraldry, suggesting the coupling of saints with their identifying attributes. *Taken* presents a haircut as fairy tale. A free-floating pair of scissors snips a lock from the head of a girl whose warm brown skin stands out against the turquoise ground. In the air behind hangs a large green cabbage whose precise meaning cannot be defined.

The larger works are both more ambitious and more complete; the girls play in the surf on a beach, squat in patches of cabbages and shoes, or kneel to peer through the broken ice of a frozen pond. In *Sweet Dreams*, two girls seen from above lounge near an almost phallic three-tiered tower of cupcakes; milk has spilt from the overturned cup in one of the girl's hands. Here the subtle eroticism is unlike the knowing voyeurism of Balthus, or the aggressive sexuality of Marlene Dumas's figures; those girls are seemingly unaware of the sensuality they radiate. Trailing floral vines that intrude from the edge of the picture undermine any sense of naturalism, forcing the viewer to recognize in the work a world of symbols as well as subjects.

The intensity with which Williamson forms the small objects in the paintings further emphasizes their symbolic quality. Nothing is painted with more attention than the



Philemona Williamson: *Winter Spill*, 2010, oil on linen, 48 by 60 inches; at June Kelly.

cupcakes and milk bottles, the cabbages and shoes, the props which are the show's leitmotifs. The girls themselves are stiff by comparison, strangely static, despite their contorted postures. Atmosphere outweighs specific meaning.

In *Garden Gift*, two girls crouch above a pile of shoes and cabbages in the foreground. Behind them a third girl, perhaps intruding on the scene, is painted with uncharacteristic looseness. It's a glimpse of how a freer handling of the paint might have given a very different impression.

—*Tadzio Koelb*