Lowly resume

The daily art of being

by Josef Woodard

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Chicago-based painter Tim Lowly's disarmingly fine exhibition at Westmont College's Reynolds Gallery makes for a layered viewing experience. We're initially struck by the potency and sureness of his painting, and the lack of cozy cliche in what is a basically realist style. But the impression deepens considerably, and elements of humanity expand, upon learning of the background of these paintings.

Primarily, the subject in Lowly's beautifully painted and thoughtfully considered works is his daughter Temma, a severely menatly and physically disabled teenager, portrayed in everyday scenes around the house. Equipped with that knowledge, we're not allowed the usual detachment in the art-watching process. Aspects of compassion and existential curiosity are naturally threaded through paintings which, at root, investigate and also celebrate the alternate reality of a loved one. Normally trivial scenes, of Temma bathing or perched on a couch before a television, are suddenly elevated by circumstance.

As Karen Halvorsen-Schreck writes in an insightful catalog essay, "For Temma, life is less about doing than being and it is at least in part a person's response to her being that helps shaper her significance."

The highlight of the show is a trilogy of paintings of Temma in the bath, with which Lowly gets at something essential about her being, an by extension, consensus reality. Temma lies in soapy water, inert, and seen from a perspective over the shoulder of a parental bath-giver, a second-hand observation. It's a scene half-seen, a story in progress. Generally, the artist seems less interested in creating whole, finished portraits than in touching on qualities of life as an ever-mysterious, and very much moving target.

Part of his method in that regard is to steer away from painting conventions, often using the out-of-focus appearance made famous by the important German artist Gerhard Richter, one of Lowly's acknowledged inspirations. Like Richter, Lowly draws parallels and implicitly questions - the visual language of paint conventions versus the photographic vision, by which we have learned to acknowledge the world. But it Richter's photo-inspired paintings tend to be cool, cerebral explorations of modern perception, Lowly uses the effect to unusually personal, warm ends.

In the smaller, luminously painted view of Temma in the bath, she gazes up and away, lost somewhere in a parallel reality. In "Tend," an almost sepia-toned painting that owes directly to photographic imagery, a woman comforts Temma as she lies on a couch, and the image appears as if through double vision. A round painting finds a couple on the beach, with everything in crisp focus except for one figure whose focus is stressed to the point of looking nearly dematerialized.

In scenes like these, the quality and careful attention to painting detail appeal on one level, while, on another, we get a strong sense of both the fragility and strength of life as it's going by. With these intimate, enticingly experimental paintings, Lowly is dealing with something both close to home and universal, without any of the usual ironic tactics common in contemporary painting circles. This is art from the heart, with a probing mind attached.

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