ART REVIEW

Lowly's `Shift' captures grace

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Tim Lowly's exhibition of recent paintings at the Gescheidle Gallery is called "Shift," which is the title of one of his acrylics on panel and also perhaps--just perhaps--a sign of the transfer of weight from subject to technique that viewers may perceive throughout the show.

At the center of Lowly's subject matter long has been his severely disabled daughter and the moments of grace that come both to her and her caregivers. These moments--it's not an exaggeration to call them transcendent--are still the focus of the work. However, in this group of pieces our attention is shifted slightly away from the incidents to how Lowly has captured them.

He is, after all, a figure painter in the 21st Century, when artists such as Gerhard Richter continually raise the issue of how viable the practice of painting still is. Lowly, like Richter, uses photographs as a means of distancing himself from the common idea that painting is self-expression. For Lowly, such expression is inevitable, and viewers feel it keenly because of the intimacy of his subject.

This time he explores basically a single theme: the interaction of mother and child. In most cases, they are simply sitting together, being engaged by something we do not see. The intense emphasis on a small domestic moment is in the line of such painters as Vermeer; the displacement of attention to a world beyond the painting evokes Degas.

Lowly works from photographs he takes, so his figures not only show the blur of movement but also peculiarities of light and camera focus. This is intentional, as are digital manipulations of color that result in some images being virtually drained of it and others having a warm, dry, dusty quality.

Lowly's challenge was to bend the matter-of-fact picturemaking of snapshot photography, which all the paintings reveal, to an artistic purpose concerned less with documentation than capturing states of spirit. This he has achieved most persuasively in the small, nearly colorless panels "Each" and "Every." There we see a wonderful equilibrium between the poetry of the scenes and the means of their depiction.

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