

## John Lees at Betty Cunningham- Paint, Memory and Emotion

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There is a tension in John Lees' paintings, currently on view at Betty Cunningham Gallery, between what the artist reveals and what he hides. Qualities for which Lees is much revered, his densely encrusted elephant skin surfaces, the paintings labored on, for years and even decades, are for me barriers to the qualities that I find most rewarding about his work; the emotional resonance of the imagery and the dream-like quality of the space and light. The press release for the show describes the paintings as like 'recurring dreams' and I would add recurring memories, felt over and over again like a stone carried in a pocket, except here the images grow rougher rather than smoother as Lees accumulates paint.



Mater, 1979-2012, Oil on Canvas, 20x20"

'Mater', is a profile portrait of John Lees' mother, which is infused with a feeling of grief and loss. Her expression is mute and worn like the profile on an old coin. We sense in her expression and the way her head dominates the format, that the subject was a formidable and determined woman. Mater is also Latin for mother and is the root word for matter, which certainly coincides with these mud-bound paintings. That Lees' mother was a Latin teacher further drives home the impression that the psychological distancing that Lees has apparently attempted with the title is in vain.



Man Sitting in Armchair (Blue Lamp),  
2012, Oil on Canvas, 15 1/4x14"

The exhibit includes several paintings depicting the artist's father including 'Man Sitting in Armchair (Blue Lamp)'. In contrast to "Mater" the figure here is diminutive, sunken, flattened and ensconced rigidly and permanently into his armchair. I get the impression that the artist, by endlessly reworking these images and through serial repetition is trying to keep moments, people and places alive, even while they have been irretrievably exiled to the gray realm of memory and dream.



Dilly Dally, 2012, Oil on Panel, 12x6 3/4"



Another charged memory is unearthed with "Dilly Dally", a painting of a puppet character from the Howdy Doody TV show of Lees' childhood; Dilly Dally with whom apparently Lees relates, conveys a sense of social unease with his big head and the streaked lines of marionette strings that cancel the figure. As if to say, who controls this awkward and childish boy body? At first I was struck by the odd humor of this piece, depicting an image of pop Americana in the visual language of 'serious' painting, something that Lees has done in other images of Chandlerian detectives and Porky Pig. But with greater reflection it seems to me the whimsical humor that occasionally crops up in Lees' work is a means of deflection as much as revelation.

This sense is underscored by a moment in a youtube video about Lees, which can be found at the following link;  
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRX3J9C-21g&feature=plcp>).

In the video the artist addresses; formal painting problems that could apply to many artists, the inspiration he draws from nature, and his practice of working on the paintings for years which struck me as not particularly revealing and a bit self-mythologizing. Almost at the end of the video though Lees lit up as he began to talk about being a kid alone in his room, and how he is still happiest alone in his studio and then clearly becomes uncomfortable speaking about time he spent being social in his 30's when he abruptly changes the subject and his tone to a whimsical discourse about the bee that had landed on his finger.



Courtyard, 1986-2013, Oil on Canvas, 10 1/2x14 1/2"

Watching those last 20 seconds it became clear to me that the project in looking at Lees' paintings is to get past the ideas about work and the years spent and even the seduction of bright jewel paint chunks glimmering from the old masterly mud; to arrive at the more rewarding and more truthful emotional tenor of the imagery; the haunted quality of memory and the hurt, sadness and joy that leak out of that imagery, I believe, against the artist's will.

John Lees is on view at Betty Cuninghams Gallery through June 22nd, 541 W 25th St New York.  
All images courtesy of John Lees and Betty Cuninghams Gallery.