

Jeff Gauntt

Brent Sikkema Gallery

John Ewing

To say that Jeff Gauntt's paintings have a nostalgic quality is not as cozy as it sounds. Invoking the past is an effective way for artists to "frame" their work, but the nostalgia presented here is suspect and slippery—like everything else in Gauntt's second solo show at Brent Sikkema (since the Houston-born artist was tapped for P.S. 1's bar-setting *Greater New York* exhibition in 2000).

Gauntt's jigsawed painting supports, bright colors and flat, stylized imagery suggest a nursery-school aesthetic—cutesy affectations redolent of a late twentieth-century American childhood. However, this quasi-juvenile landscape does not offer a safe, comfy place to rest the eye and mind (or suck a thumb). Rather, the familiar look, feel and texture of Gauntt's large, acrylic-on-wood paintings are preparatory to a disorienting head trip with an ambiguous end.

If I'm projecting my own ambivalence onto Gauntt's paintings, they invite it. With traces of narrative in their cryptic, schematic compositions—including tree houses, clothes, caves and labyrinths—there's plenty of room for the subjective imagination to move around and cook up trouble. The curio-cabinet systems that hold everything together—above and below ground—feel isolating and oddly empty. Strewn with leaves and melting snow, these weird domestic cubbies seem less a cheerful warren for the *Berenstain Bears* than a furtive, Freudian maze for blind meanderings and paranoid assertions.

Past Tense/Future Tense is the enormous centerpiece of the show, a 12-x-8 feet painting composed of four wood panels with jigsaw-puzzle-style block reliefs. A blue tree with polka dots and voluptuous puffy "foliage" is pictured crowning a network of underground chambers. These contain a shoe, clothes rod and coat, birdhouse, suburban tract home and a miniature tree with stylized autumn foliage, painted here and elsewhere in the puffy graphic shorthand that stands in for foliage in cartoons (and children's drawings).

Is this image a trapdoor into some domestic melodrama? Delicate blue roots riddled with dotted polyps run invasively through everything. It isn't clear whether this capillarylike circuit is nourishing or disintegrating the subterranean tableau, but an air of abandonment—as well as a blue-tinged chill—permeates the composition. How these disparate, scale-bending images relate to each other is anyone's guess, but they are concrete enough to suggest the outline of an arrested story.

In this mode, the most successful work in the show is *Fades in the Winter*. This careful painting strikes an impressive balance between flat cartoon imagery,



Jeff Gauntt, *Fades in the Winter*, 2003
Acrylic on wood
36 x 48 inches

wood-block reliefs and ambiguous narrative elements. The central image is a blue curtain hanging from a rod. Gathered at the top, the curtain—with stem and leaf decoration—resembles a woman's skirt that flutters in front of a green void framed by a yellow field.

I'm reluctant to call these elements "doorway" and "wall" because the flat rendering offers no clues about the depth or nature of the depicted space. Likewise, a brown rectangle at the bottom of the composition vaguely suggests a threshold, plinth or cabinet top where the delicate plant motif is repeated, rising up from a small pile of snow. These images are painted with an angular, Dr. Seuss precariousness that is accented by a handful of rectangular blocks scattered across the work. These small blocks interrupt the image and fragment the picture plane—a wonderful visual counterpoint to the wistful ambiguity of the feminized curtain.

Snow—as well as the color white—mounds and melts subtly in several of the paintings. Along with sloshing water present in other works, this suggestion of wet environments contributes to the chilliness of Gauntt's paintings. Likewise, the cumulative effect of the oblique imagery—painted in an unrelentingly

cheerful style—is more poker-faced than giddily transparent as the visual flatness might otherwise suggest. Gauntt's bravura techniques for manipulating form, content and context cause these evocative tensions throughout the show.

Dwells on the Bottom (1, 2, and 3)—a large triptych depicting an aquarium—is the least effective in this regard. Though meticulously painted, the fish and contents of the tank present an open and unambiguous image with no creepy, psychological opacity to work against. Without this unsettled dynamic—the mysterious "X factor" in Gauntt's work—the painting is as tepid and age-inappropriate for mature audiences as a three-piece puzzle.

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