

Shadow Play

Ena Swansea's subject is shadows, the fleeting nature of which she defies with the scale, sumptuousness of handling and richness of nuance of her paintings. Her first solo show in New York, at the Robert Miller Gallery, is an extraordinary debut. The show includes nine works, most of them quite large, measuring about nine feet square. A fully-formed talent seems to have come in under the radar.

Initially seductive for their very coyness, these pictures gradually reveal strengths precisely in those areas where a given quality seemed sparse. Compressed within the strange limitations of her palette, for instance, is an expansive range of hue and tone. At first, they look to be black and white with shades of gray, or in a few cases, in muted tones of sepia, but on closer inspection, there is a fantastic play of color seeping through from behind, animating the images. She does grisaille in technicolor. The smooth sheen of her paint surface understates an elaborate choreography of brushmark.

One of the Minimalists talked about art that's smart enough to be dumb. Swansea is smart enough just to be quiet, to steer a gentle course between the histrionics of self-expression, the pedantry of observation and the rhetoric of reduction to make work that is poignant, convincing, economical. In her case, skill and elegance come with neither the sweat nor the snootiness which usually mar these graces.

Painted shadows flutter in and out of the history of art just like real shadows on a sunny fall day. Sometimes they are a detail to make illusion the more complete, sometimes an excrescence to be sacrificed on the altar of artifice. The Impressionists are credited with the discovery of the color in shadow. Swansea steps back from the expressive overstatement of this truth to reintroduce an element of surprise. Color, like form, is to be softly intimated, to persuade gently. But let's not overplay this subtlety business: Swansea is cinematic in immediacy and scale; as in a movie house, or concert hall, quietness envelops us, nuance is there for us.



Barnabas Collins, 1997-98, oil on canvas, 108 x 108 inches

What a wonderful subject shadows are for an artist negotiating a space for herself between abstraction and representation. They are nature's readymade art. To paint them is to acknowledge a Platonic status for art that is at once dismissive and compelling, for shadows are a by-product, fleeting, elusive, distortive of the things they latch onto, a sensation revealed in time. To fix a shadow is to arrest time more impertinently than virtually any other kind of mimesis. To paint shadows is to advertise the affinities between the chosen medium and subject, what's confounding and quirky in each.

Swansea presumably knows Gauguin's advice to Emile Bernard: "If instead of a figure you put the shadow only of a person, you have found an original starting point, the strangeness of which you have calculated." Her shadows are palpable, but the objects that might have cast them are spirited away. In a similar conceit, the responsible light source has been obscured. The compositions are also botanically impossible, bringing together flowers and leaves which could not, naturally, cohabit on the same branch. But for all this artifice, the images register as credible. To feel real obviously counts for more to her than actually being so.

Although she has experimented with shadow boxes, she tells me, the photographic images that resulted were staid in comparison with the compositions she comes up with from imagination. She realized that she would have to continue to construct her compositions formally, painstaking though this process tends to be in the way she carries it through. Her approach is traditional, scaling up her big canvases from resolved sketches. Despite the voluptuous painterliness of these images, they have a kind of photographic quality. Maybe the right word isn't quality but aura: her images have the authority of a moment of moving film. The sensation -- fleeting but particular, elusive but gripping -- stretches the space between projection and memory.

According to Pliny, the first artist was a woman who painted shadows. Book XXXV of his *Historia Naturalis* tells of a Corinthian maid who drew the silhouette of her fiancé, who was about to go abroad, from the shadow of his head cast on the wall by a candle. Her father, a potter, then filled in the outline with clay and modelled the face in relief so that his daughter would have a souvenir of her beloved. At the opposite end of history, Ena Swansea can be said to paint in the shadow of tradition. She basks in the light of the masters, distilling their techniques and making them relevant to her own vision. These are paintings of voluptuous intelligence.



Two Men, 1998, oil on canvas, 104 x 104 inches



Sebastain White, 1998, oil on linen, 72 x 105 inches