

# Art Speak

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## **Liz Holly's Restless Explorations and Aesthetic Adventures**

**Sean Simon**

In a time when too many artists employ stylistic gimmicks to gain attention, it is heartening to encounter a painter like Liz Holly, whose oils on canvas and works on paper can be seen in a gem of a solo show at Belanthe Gallery, 142 Court Street, Brooklyn, March 1 through 29.

Liz Holly needs no ploys or devices to gain our attention and respect. Her paintings and works on paper win one over with their simple formal beauty and honest self expression. There is no cheap showmanship in her work; just a deep and abiding belief in the art of painting that shines through her every canvas, alerting one that a formidable talent has arrived on the scene.

Holly's paintings are sometimes abstract, sometimes figurative, sometimes somewhat in between. However, there is always a sense of subject, of direct inspiration in her work. Her landscapes can be specific or generalized, yet they always capture natural essences, rather than literal appearances, stressing the superiority of that which is truthful over that which is merely factual.

Some of Holly's most impressive paintings are small landscapes on paper. In one of these, a golden sky hovers over boldly simplified trees, with blue hills in the distance. In another small painting, a small grey violet house and a telephone pole evoke a middle American suburb with utmost economy and

painterly grace. Yet another small landscape make a vivid visual statement with five poplar trees rising against a brilliant orange sunset.

Holly's bold shorthand in her smaller paintings succeeds just as admirably with the figure. She can establish a strong human presence in a small canvas with the figure of a man emerging from vigorously brushed, roughly rectangular areas of color. There is no need to depict details, not even the features of the face. Holly can evoke the full person, a sense of a particular individual, through the position and posture of the figure, capturing a sense of world weary resignation in the slope of a green shirted shoulder. Here, her handling of space is reminiscent of some of deKooning's very early paintings of working men, as well as some of Arshile Gorky's small portrait studies.

Holly's larger paintings are considerably more abstract, with the figurative allusions much more expressively distorted and somewhat obscured by larger, more sweeping forms within the composition. In "Dance of Death," there are very definite allusions to skulls and the ribcage of a skeleton, yet Holly's brilliant colors – particularly her bright bursts of red and yellow – are anything but funereal. Perhaps the artist is telling us that the end of life is but another beginning, for the bright colors and buoyant forms truly do suggest a dance, perhaps even a celebration.

In "Birth Rites," another large canvas, we see Liz Holly's neo Cubist roots in her use of shifting planes, overlaid with softly diffused pastel hues. While the dominant colors are blues, greens, and yellows, a central pink form with sensual contours suggests the fleshy figure of a woman.

Other works reveal her sense of restless exploration and aesthetic adventure. From a large abstraction, suggesting a rock quarry with streaks of yellow sunlight pouring in over its jagged shapes, she can turn to an exquisite little portrait head of a woman on cardboard, or an energetic still life on paper, with bits of collage added for textural interest.

It is her willingness to continually experiment that keeps the art of Liz Holly vital and makes it constantly and consistently compelling for the viewer. ■