

Art in America

Sarah Rapson at Trial Balloon 2

Eileen Myles
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Last February two debuts occurred on the 400 block of Broadway. Trial Balloon 2, a women-only gallery, opened, and there Sarah Rapson, a young British painter, had her first solo show. Last fall the same space, then Trial Balloon 1, produced a group show of four artists, Nicola Tyson, co-founder of the gallery, Siobhan Liddell, Josephine Pryde and Sara Staton. Like several other small exhibition spaces recently opened on the same block, Trial Balloon is a practical response to the stream of gallery closings in the past two seasons and the subsequent lack of ad-venturous venues for new artists. Sarah Rapson's severe and comical canvases are an excellent antidote to any conservative trends that the current belt-tightening in the art world might imply.

Her dramatic paintings employ a flattened-out peephole strategy: we seem to be peering at her images through a nonspecific surrounding space. Surveyed quickly, her moderate-sized paintings (the biggest is 56 by 48 inches) appear to shrink back against the wall. Yet each is a private space unto itself, all black, adamantly painted and repainted, gouged and fumed over before (in most cases) a newsprint image is stuck on, torn off and stuck on again. The total effect is that of a small angry poem, savagely rewritten. Big Love, which felt like the central item of the show, holds a postcard-size black-and-white newsprint photo at its center. At first the strategy is glib-seeming, but one soon begins to tumble in. Depicted are two semi-dressed women at the beach, one leaning forward, talking to her friend who's wading in toward her, face downcast. There's a strong dramatic charge to the image, but much is left to the imagination of the viewer. It's an apparently mainstream image invested, I think, with lesbian meaning. Here, as elsewhere, the small vignette is surrounded in shiny black, a square of it, then another, filling out the canvas, half of which is repainted. The puckered, worked-over surface of each painting creates a tunnel effect that draws the viewer relentlessly into the chosen image without explaining it. It's a funky job, and the painting's tortured surface only enhances our voyeurism.

Rapson's method is pretty constant throughout. Sometimes the surface of the distressed painting is image-free—in one case, just a few chalky lines that stand in for text along with a single word: "Slut." Untitled 1 is a photo diptych within a single black canvas. One part reproduces some kind of decorative oval—a rug or a necklace?—and the other half is a propeller plane. The overall effect is one of luxury. Underneath the imagery, in shiny black, appear the words, "Christine, you can have this painting." These tossed-off and embedded remarks emphasize the serial, almost diaristic nature of Rapson's paintings and again make them feel like poetry to me.

I learned that this is the first collection of her work Rapson hasn't destroyed. The last canvas I looked at in the show was called Custom Guns; the image was of two rifles—a page torn from a catalogue. The black surface surrounding them was pit-ted with one real hole right beneath the image, sort of bashed in. I thought of William Burroughs's shot-up canvases of a few years ago and felt relieved that at least the gun was in female hands. A painter with real negative capability, Rapson has created a small and gutsy oeuvre that might best be described as high-impact representation; she flings her blunt and highly charged images passionately at you from afar.

—Eileen Myles