

insolitus: SUDA/CIFUENTES/WALL

SKOTIA GALLERY
150 WEST MARCY STREET, SUITE 103, SANTA FE

Insolitus: My Latin dictionary (glad I kept it after *Winnie Ille Pu*) tells me that the title of this group show of three talented artists means “unusual,” “uncommon.” So *insolitus* is an apt way to characterize the recent, thoughtfully displayed exhibit at Skotia Gallery. It’s apt if only for the fact that what is common to the work of all three artists—Joshua Suda, Rodrigo Cifuentes, and Elliott Wall—is quite uncommon in contemporary art and rarely stressed or even taught in art schools today: namely, realism, denoting a style of depiction that faithfully captures the visible appearance of objects, producing a “photographic likeness” in the case of the human subject, and a highly convincing illusion of three-dimensionality, with its fullest manifestation as *trompe l’oeil*. Suda and Wall achieve this hyperrealism with the aid of digital software programs (GIMP and Photoshop, respectively), beginning with manipulation of a photo image with the digital editing and retouching tool, and followed by the hands-on application of oil paint. Cifuentes works from a photo source as a reference but relies directly on draftsmanship to obtain a more tactile, textured realism.

In Suda’s and Wall’s work the focus is the portrait, in the broad sense of the genre that embraces the model as subject rather than a specific individual, or sitter. In Wall’s oil paintings, several of the titles have a classical reference from Greek and Roman mythology: his *Artemis* is the Greek goddess of the hunt, the Roman Diana; the goddess in his *Khloris* is identified by the Latin poet Ovid as the Greek version of the Latin Flora, Roman goddess of flowers, wife of the west wind Zephyr. And Wall’s *Lyre Plyre 3* depicts a nymph holding the ancient stringed instrument favored by Apollo—well actually, as any observant viewer would see, it shows the model posed as if she were a nymph. Wall follows the nineteenth-century painting convention for figure studies involving a nude female, in which the model is portrayed in the guise of some classical goddess or mythic maiden. Happily so, since today (much as then), the viewer is as about as interested in the mythical reference as the moonlit model in Wall’s *Artemis* is in the quiver of arrows artfully placed by her side, towards which her languorous reach is simply a formal device of the artist to reveal the full sensuality of his reclining nude. Likewise for *Khloris*, whose dominant pale-green background, while symbolic of Flora, is largely a chromatic conceit to set off the figure of the crouching model.

Wall’s model in *Khloris*—featured in four of his five paintings in the show—points up another aspect of his work shared in common with Suda’s paintings. The strength of the figure studies of both artists, beyond formal effects and vibrant immediacy, is in no small part a function of the artist’s choice of model, be it by design or chance. The female models who are the subjects of Suda’s *Amalgamation*, *Disconnect*, and *At a Moment* are visually interesting, as is Wall’s principal model for his paintings, invoking an artist-and-model tradition as recent as Andrew Wyeth’s *Helga* and as old as Rembrandt’s *Saskia*. Does that imply that either artist’s work would lose much of its appeal, if not its effect, without these specific models? Sure, why not. But if not, enough to warrant a healthy respect on the part of the artist for the role of the model as muse—a respect that Wall and Suda already bring to their work.

The wry tone of the small graphite, oil, or graphite-and-oil studies of Rodrigo Cifuentes are in stark contrast to the formal tack of the works by the two other artists of *insolitus*. Yet Cifuentes brings a high degree of drawing skills to bear in rendering arresting images of meticulous decay and orderly dissolution. While his imagery is highly veristic, and in some pieces approaches photorealism, that verism is harnessed in the service of a grim and gritty social commentary. A kind of desperate black humor informs the surrealist image of a spider perched atop an infant skull (*Julio Ruelas Harassing a Child*). The desiccated remains of one human jawbone (*Mexican Still Life*) and the rotting flesh that clings to another (*The Price of Technology*) merge for the viewer in a macabre pairing of *memento mori* with a grisly *caveat emptor*. A Goya on Gatorade, Cifuentes chronicles a rarely seen but never absent stratum of modern life for much of the world.

The challenge to realist painting from photography, dating from the late nineteenth century, fades today in comparison with the mimetic capacity of digital technology to create and manipulate high-definition, 3-D imagery. Perhaps the only effective response can be found in the kind of work on view in *insolitus*, one which is marked, in the approach of all three artists, by an overriding sense of creative control and an underlying concern for poetic import.

—RICHARD TOBIN



Elliott Wall, *Khloris*, oil on panel, 60" x 36", 2006