

Elena Climent: Affirming the Real

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It was more than ten years ago when Mary-Anne Martin and I went to visit the Greenwich Village studio of Elena Climent for the first time. I had already seen examples of her art, one memorable picture forming part of a group show at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in SoHo. I remember being so impressed by the simplicity and boldness of the painting – a simple still life of a few unadorned elements on a plain surface. There was no decorativeness, no sentimentality, none of the “intimacy” that has so often (and, often, so erroneously) been cited as characteristic of still life paintings. This picture, and others that I saw when I soon made my way to visit Climent, appeared to me as virtually dead-pan descriptions of the palpable realities of the tangible bits and pieces of those places she inhabited – her New York apartment and her house in Mexico City.

After one or two visits to the artist’s studio, the objects and places she depicted in the usually small-size oils on canvas or panel began to emerge onto another, non-pictorial plane of my imagination. The almost-tactile realness of her pots, birdcages, or childrens’ toys resonated in my consciousness with a surprising endurance. At one point Elena confessed to me that she had another side to her artistic personality with which she created far more hermetic images than those objectifications of everyday existence with which I had become familiar. In a series of tiny watercolors, Climent had illustrated a romantic inner world of personal mythology, fairy tales and dreams. I began to think of Elena as someone who made art from both sides of her

brain. The sobrieties of her kitchen shelves or corner cabinets would alternate with miniature depictions of her innermost fantasies.

As Climent's career developed, her work grew in size and complexity. She engaged more directly with iconography derived from her Mexican childhood. She deftly managed to navigate the problematic paths also taken by numerous Mexican artists in the late 1980s and early 90s who re-examined the visual manifestations of Mexico's material culture. Climent managed to evade the "traps of cliché" (to paraphrase Octavio Paz). While much of her symbolic vocabulary derives from a personal assessment of Mexican imagery (altars for Days of the Dead, tropical fruits in an urban market), her questioning of their meanings as well as a sense of irony as light as ether prevent the objects from taking on a misplaced aura of solemnity or unseemly mythic pretension.

Elena Climent has continuously dealt with the intersections and collisions of the past and the present. In a moving series of images painted in her childhood house after the death of her mother, the artist depicted silent rooms, mirrors devoid of reflection, furniture with no sitters. Climent intimated the inevitable sense of loss but with none of the romantic longing or sentimentality that a less rationally analytical spirit would produce. Her depictions of deceased relatives whose photographs are placed on home altars surrounded by the yellow marigolds with which indigenous Mexicans from ancient times to today have honored the dead, reveal, more than a desire to re-create past emotional attachments, an interest in representing the complexity of ethnic origins from which she (as so many of us in an increasingly diverse world)

emerged. Spanish-ness and Jewish-ness merge in a cultural blending consonant with the long history of racial and national *mestizaje* so eloquently depicted in Mexican *casta* paintings of the 18th century.

Elena Climent's latest series of paintings is entitled "Childhood." In a sense, these pictures represent a coalescing of several strands of her artistic personality. Their discreet size and intense colors recall the intimate, not-for-public consumption watercolors that I first saw in the artist's studio more than ten years ago. In these, as in the present images, Climent demonstrates a certain personal liberty in order to conceptualize notions of her own youth, that of her children, the daughters of friends or relatives. While there is certainly a re-examination of the past in these works as well as an explicit desire to merge with or continue to experience impulses of childlike insouciance, we are constantly aware that the paper dolls, miniature furniture or plastic animals, are all integral components of a ritual of artifice. When viewing these pictures we cannot truly enter into any made-up fantasy worlds. But we do indeed engage in a complex dialogue with highly elaborated space, texture, light and color. While it is foolish to deny that these arresting pictures embody a dazzling visual and viscerally seductive power, they are not "pretty" or "cute" in any conventional sense.

Climent's "Childhood" paintings may be related, at least obliquely, to the fascination on the part of a large sector of the Mexican population, with miniatures. In markets and corner stands one can often find any number of tiny objects. While traditional miniatures are by now largely a tourist commodity, the popular taste for diminutive things remains very much alive, rein-

forced in the Mexican imagination by the proliferation of tiny plastic dolls and toys (usually made elsewhere) easily obtainable by children. In her pictures Climent exploits this cultural discourse of minuscule objects to create a series of visual mnemonic devices to recall, in palpable terms, chapters from a lost notebook or diary of past episodes of her life. There is a conventional sense of wonder here, but there is also a strong and inevitable intimation of melancholy. While Elena's paintings represent an affirmation of materiality, they also open a small window onto the sometimes bitter-sweet ruminations of the self.

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