



Martha Mayer Erlebacher, *Hubbard*, 2002

Courtesy Hackett-Freedman Gallery, San Francisco

Over the last quarter-century, **Martha Mayer Erlebacher** has established a solid reputation as a figurative painter, with a score of solo exhibitions and a place in the permanent collections of an impressive roster of institutions, including the Library of Congress, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. She is best known for her classically influenced nudes, often cast as participants in anxiety-laden mythic scenarios, as in *The Death of Orpheus* (1997). Her recent show at San Francisco's Hackett-Freedman Gallery represents something of a departure. The Philadelphia-based Erlebacher has turned to the still-life genre, working in the tradition of the European Old Masters, especially the Dutch and the Spaniard Zurbarán (1598–1664), and of the American Raphaelle Peale (1774–1825).

The formula for Erlebacher's recent compositions is simple. Ripe fruit, ceramic vessels and occasional pieces of glass or silver are deployed like elements in a frieze across the horizontal-format canvases. The line of the supporting table runs parallel to the bottom of the picture frame. The dramatically lit objects are thrown into high relief, enhanced by the tenebrous shadows of featureless backgrounds. There is evident admiration for the things being depicted, succulent fruits and graceful pieces of antique redware and stoneware from the artist's own extensive personal collection. In the translation from three-dimensional reality to the more abstract, two-dimensional space of the canvas, new beauties are discovered. The dark ceramic forms—polished to a sheen that gives them the reflective power of a convex mirror, pitted and scarred by use—make a dramatic contrast with the sumptuous yellows, reds and greens of the voluptuous fruits. At the same time, there is an almost geometric idealism in the dialogue between shapes and colors. The effect is simultaneously austere and opulent.

In *Nectarines* (2001) the Rubensesque vermillion of the eponymous fruits blazes against the browns and brick red of jugs and pitchers. The juiciness of the nectarines and the earthy simplicity of the vessels suggest a rural summer idyll. Yet every object has a similar round-

shouldered silhouette, unifying the composition. A different mood prevails in *Hubbard* (2002), named for the hard winter melon that anchors one side of the composition. With faintly grotesque gourd shapes, a plate of yellowish pears with only a faint blush, and a cluster of grapes, this painting has an autumnal feel. Certain details—the silver plate reflecting the piece of fruit it holds, a purplish wine glass with a seventeenth-century look—recall Dutch still-life paintings that lament the fragility of nature even as they celebrate its bounty. The grapes in particular are executed with almost *trompe l’oeil* virtuosity. Note the cast shadow of the crooked grape stem against the pale gold of a pear.

The objects in these paintings occupy convincingly illusionistic space rather than calling attention to the figure-ground continuum in the manner of Cézanne. Yet these works are conceptually sophisticated as well as immediately pleasing. Using a limited vocabulary of curves, playing them harmonically against the straight edge of the table, Erlebacher exploits the tension between the surface dynamic of shape and color, and a fiction of sculptural weight. Finally, in choosing to work in this particular vein of the still-life genre, she engages artists of the past in a lively exchange. By concentrating on fruits, associated with the Roman goddess Pomona, she brings to this modest genre—like Zubarán and Peale before her—a sense of reverence for the physical delights of the natural world, captured in the stillness of art. “Martha Mayer Erlebacher: Still-Life Paintings” was on view this summer, at Hackett-Freedman Gallery, 250 Sutter Street, San Francisco, California 94108. Telephone: (415) 362-7152.