Albert York

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

When Calvin Tomkins profiled Albert York for the *New Yorker* in 1995, the artist had shown regularly since 1963 and had acquired a quite glamorous collector base. But he was a private man and his work is private, too, even while instantly entrancing (one of its many paradoxes), and he was also a painter of apparently calm figurative scenes, landscapes, and floral still lifes mostly around a foot or so tall and wide—this in the period of Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual art. Despite York's relative success, then, he was obscure—hence Tomkins's neat and again paradoxical description of him as America's "most highly admired unknown artist."

Born in 1928 in Detroit, York went to art school on and off as a young man, but much of his education was self-directed: "I looked at just about everything in the Metropolitan," he told Tomkins, and he particularly liked Albert Pinkham Ryder. Another apparently formative experience came from a day job in a frame shop that was once asked to frame three hundred works by Giorgio Morandi. It is tempting to see York's art as a fusion of Ryder's allegorical landscapes and Morandi's closely observed yet spiritually informed still lifes, even while his work is too fully itself to look that much like theirs.

Although none of York's paintings is genuinely well known, this show included the most recognized ones: the vanitas *Woman and Skeleton*, ca. 1967, for example, in which the two figures of the title seem amicable enough, conversing as if at a picnic, although the woman is naked and the skeleton carries a scythe that warns of her end. *Reclining Female Nude with Cat*, 1978, is a remake of Manet's *Olympia* of 1863 (Manet is another of York's forefathers), but that grand canvas has shrunk to York's usual foot or so wide, while the cat has become outsize. The showstoppers for me were the still lifes and landscapes, and the works that combine the two—*Flowers in a Landscape*, 1992, for example, in which a crowd of differently vectored dabs of red and blue, pink and apricot condenses into a bouquet set outdoors under the sky. But there was barely a work in the show that could not be called lovely.

Loveliness, though, is complicated. Much in York's work you could almost think premodern, recalling a painter like Chardin as much as Manet. He is modern, though, in the way he shows you how the image is constructed, how brush has dragged pigment to make it. I also wonder whether he felt a kind of modern dissatisfaction with his chosen pictorial devices. According to Tomkins, he was unhappy with his work—seeing a museum show of his paintings in 1989, he thought they were "pretty lousy"—and even as he stuck to the art school genres, he worked around them. The paintings are as eccentric as they are lovely—the figures sometimes awkward, or wearing odd costumes; the proportions sometimes off, like Olympia's cat or in the still lifes with no guide to scale, so that tulips might be as high as trees; and there are occasional peculiar narratives, as when an Indian, a conquistador, and an alligator face off in an unlikely three-way fight. There is also a tension between the imagined and the real. York told Tomkins that he painted outdoors but wasn't a straightforward plein air painter: "I would see this tree or that tree, and put it down on the panel, but rearrange the whole thing. I invented it. It came to mind as I was working." And in fact the spatial disposition of the elements in York's landscapes gives them an odd quality, both unnatural and perfect.

Albert York, ***Landscape with Two Pink Carnations in a Glass Goblet,*** **1983,** oil on wood, 12⅞ × 12".

York made several paintings of cows and several of dogs, and, as with Morandi and Ryder, it is tempting to see these animals as indexing poles of his sensibility: the cows his concern with obdurate, unbotherable fact, the dogs his work's vital alertness, its sense of attunement to some inner spirit in things. Throughout York's art, there is a sense of latent meaning, as if a tree or a rose were not just itself but a Platonic object, itself in some other dimension. Other painters have produced this effect, but rarely in so concentrated a way.

—*David Frankel*

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