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Judith Burton: Visual Nuances

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S H E L D O N

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

Judith Burton: Visual Nuances

November 24, 1999-January 16, 2000

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Judith Burton: Visual Nuances

fig. 4, *Scoop*, 1999, oil on masonite, Courtesy of the artist

The history and development of the pictorial tradition in the West is punctuated by many formal and conceptual tensions, among them the tension between representation and abstraction, between mimesis and personal expression, between objectivity and subjectivity, between the artist and the viewer. The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is pleased to present *Judith Burton: Visual Nuances*, a solo exhibition featuring twenty-four paintings and two monotypes by an important Nebraska artist whose aesthetic expression succeeds in celebrating these many tensions and formal subtleties that are such an imporant part of our visual arts tradition.

However, much attention–perhaps too much attention–has been paid by the contemporary artworld to works of art that have tried to "resolve" these tensions and subtleties. Some contemporary art screams or shouts its meaning, intimidating the viewer into a passive "receptive" role for fear that the artist's message won't be heard. Others sit mute, begging (or daring) the viewer to speak on behalf of them.

In refreshing contrast, Burton's work celebrates the tensions, subtleties, the "visual nuances" that lie at the core of the unique act of image making. Further, Burton's visual imagery is a whisper, the still small voice of the aesthetic in a visual culture that is often drowned out in the sea of aesthetic screaming or amid the "sophisticated" white noise or cynical silence of art institutional brinkmanship. Burton's "visual nuances," are radical departures from a visual culture that saturates our lives and systematically trains us to crave an aesthetic of either excessive passivity or aggression. Burton's pictures, however, ask much from us as viewers. They require that we learn again to appreciate visual nuances,

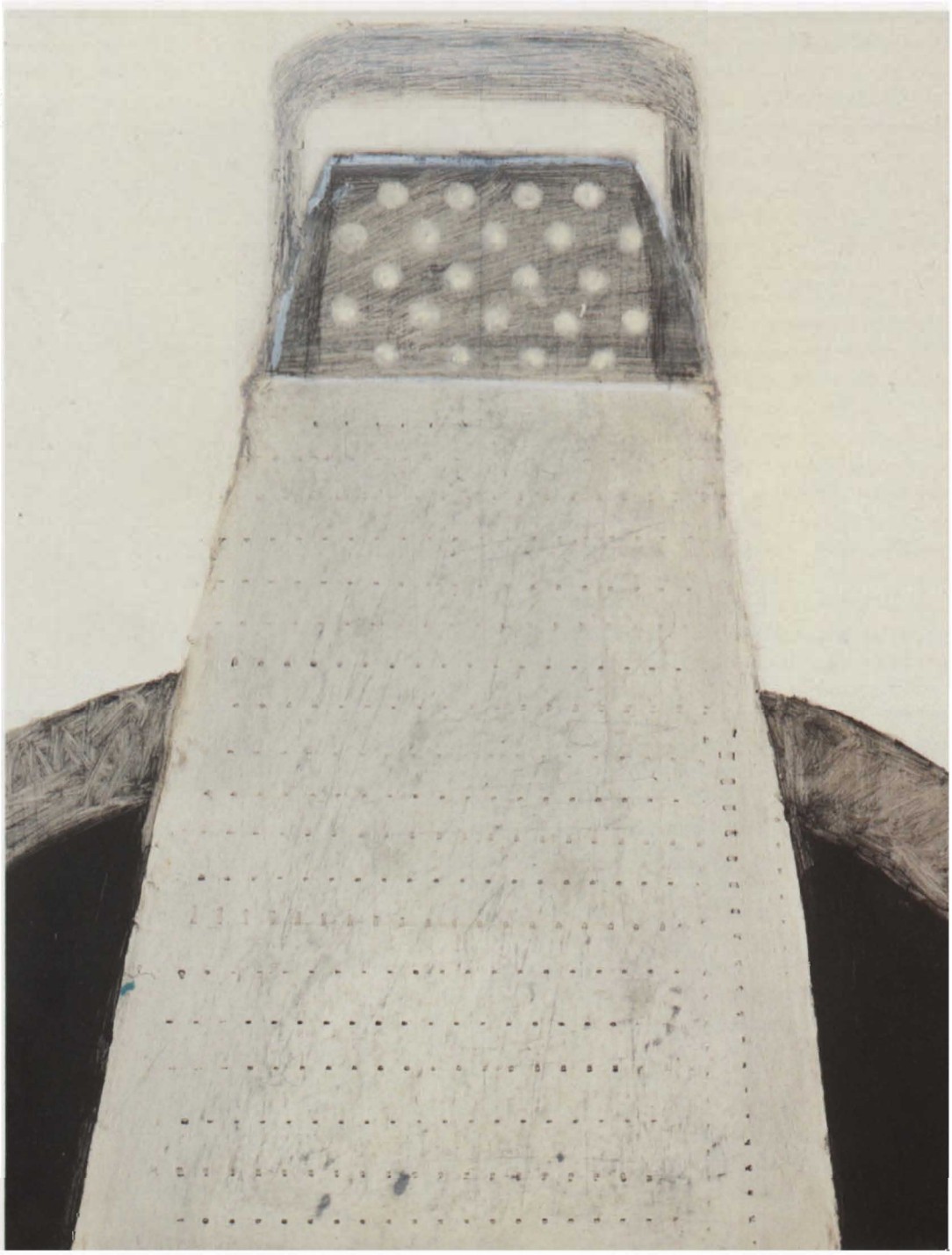

fig. 3, *Four Sided Grater*, 1999, oil on paper, Courtesy of the artist

nuances that take patience to excavate and then to enjoy. Burton's pictures also require sustained contemplation and a visual attention span that is measured in many minutes rather than a few fragmented milliseconds. These paintings also require that we recognize them as products of an artist's unique aesthetic intention and thus are willing to enter a visual dialogue with them. These subtle pictures ask that we interact with them while at the same time respecting their autonomy as products of another's creativity, not mass-produced for the purpose of glorifying the viewer's insatiable lust for consumption. They therefore ask us to respect the integrity of the artist as a creative human being. In addition, these paintings ask that we appreciate them as both "representations of" a world "out there" and as autonomous objects consisting of only paint applied to canvas or paper.

Burton's pictures also ask that we re-learn to appreciate the little things in life. One is tempted to call these paintings "naive." But the "naiveté" is not a sophisticated stylistic tool to appear unsophisticated. It is the naive, and perhaps even scandalous assertion, that in this society in which we live, one can still enjoy looking at the "little things." Society certainly sees this as naive, as quaint, hopelessly idealistic. But Burton reveals that our culture needs to look at the world and all that is in it in a fresh way, not as objects for "use," as "means to an end," or as products to be consumed, but to respect, even celebrate, the incidental objects around us, objects we take for granted, but objects that shape our physical environments. In this way, Burton's paintings are naive. It is a naiveté, an innocence, that, as absurd as it seems to our culture, needs to be recovered. As the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff argued in his book *Art in Action*, the visual arts can be–and have been–used for many different and even contradictory purposes by many different communities and cultures.[1] Burton's pictures serve the purpose of celebrating life's visual subtleties, a celebration lost in a generation reared on extremes, whether in the visual, moral, social, or political arenas.

Burton's pictures reaffirm in paint what environmental and social psychologists have often argued, that the aesthetic plays a foundational role as we constitute our environments, as we "environ," that is, actively create and sustain our environments, both psychic and concrete, conceptual and physical. The subjects of Burton's pictures included in this exhibition are found in the artist's studio, her own intimate environment, an environment that she has shaped. In spite of her resistance to the strong temptation to imbue them with "deep" symbolic meaning, these objects are profoundly meaningful. They make up Burton's aesthetic environment, her lived environment as she paints, listens to music, or drinks coffee. Because of the important role that these objects play in her environment, several of them have been exhibited along with the paintings that depict them. This exercise, which brings a part of Burton's studio environment into the exhibition space, is not intended to show how "accurate" or "realistic" the artist's depictions are. Rather, it is to affirm the concreteness of Burton's images, their origins in a reality "out there" with which the artist interacts creatively. She "finds" these objects, brings them to her studio, and they assume a role in her environment. And as she paints them she is, in effect, affirming and even celebrating, her environment, investing these banal objects with a most unexpected dignity, integrity, and even monumentality.

For example, in *Egg* (fig. 1), Burton has not represented a real egg, an object that does possess iconographic meaning in the visual arts, a meaning associated with the origins of life, but is rather simply one of those mass-produced knickknacks intended to adorn (or clutter) shelves, window sills, or other domestic locations. But Burton isolates it–lavishing aesthetic attention on it–as she works the pictorial surface to create nuances of color and texture that are evidence of her deep involvement with the pictorial surface. In *Giant Bottle* (fig. 2) Burton offers an overhead view of a common bottle that achieves a kind of monumentality that is not only striking but even humorous, for with the painting's prosaic title she removes any lingering desires on the viewer's part to invoke symbolic or allegorical meaning. In her hands, the bottle is just "a giant bottle," nothing more, but also, nothing less. And it acquires dignity because it has assumed a place in Burton's environment. This humorous monumentality is also evidenced in *Four Sided Grater* (fig. 3), in which a cheese grater is given epic proportions, looming on the surface as a gloriously sublime structure.

However, it would be a mistake to categorize Burton's pictures as merely representational and their significance based solely on their mimetic qualities. Burton's pictures are representational *and* abstract. In fact, it is their abstractness that is most obvious at first glance. In *Scoop* (fig. 4), for example, the solidity of the scoop is essentially dissolved into the two-dimensional flatness of the pictorial surface; the scoop assumes an almost purely formal quality. In addition, Burton displays an interesting dichotomy that increases the pictorial tension; that is, she contrasts–or pits–the simple and concise lines that depict the scoop and, in addition, organize the pictorial surface with the intensely worked-over, fussed with, and even obsessively marked surface. This supposed "background" in fact forces itself into the foreground and vies with the scoop for our attention. It is this competition between the object and its background, between representation and abstraction, between the illusion of three dimensions and the two-dimensional concreteness of the pictorial surface that activates Burton's pictures, that makes them crackle with aesthetic tension. The abstract character of Burton's work also is found in *Same But Different* (fig. 5), which depicts a rusty piece of junk metal that, with the form repeated in successive rows across the pictorial surface, become formal receptacles of Burton's subtle manipulations and changes, giving each form an individual identity, while at the same time maintaining and, in fact, increasing, the abstractness of the pattern.

This is, to my mind, what Burton's pictures are "about," if they are "about" anything. We miss her larger and more relevant aesthetic point if we get stuck on evaluating how well Burton "depicts" her subjects, whether it be the cigar box, the bottle, the tape measure, or the spoon. These paintings celebrate not only the world of objects, but the world created by the artist, her own use of the aesthetic in appreciating, celebrating, and engaging with her world on the most concrete and personal of levels, through the objects with which she surrounds herself. "The things of the world," as the philosopher Hannah Arendt observed, "have the function of stabilizing human life. . . ." They do this, Arendt argues, because of their "objectivity." "[A]gainst the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world. . . ."[2] Cultural anthropologist Mihaly Cslkszentmihalyl has gone so far as to argue that "things stabilize our sense of who we are; they give a permanent shape to our views of ourselves that otherwise would quickly dissolve in the flux of consciousness."[3] Burton's pictures function as the aesthetic residue of her deep interaction with the "things of the world." Not only do Burton's pictures celebrate the "things of the world," they also celebrate the individual creativity of the one interacting with them. Burton's pictures assert and reassert her own subjectivity, her own creativity, her own ability to engage deeply with the world around her through the aesthetic in a manner reminiscent of philosopher Martin Heidegger's view that artmaking was, in essence, world making."[4]

Burton's pictures are not solipsistic. They encourage the viewer to participate vicariously in her delight in these objects, not simply display "her experience." We take our own

pleasure in tracing Burton's delicate contours, absorbing her deeply incised and intensely worked-over surfaces; a pleasure that leads to the appreciation of the subtleties, the "visual nuances" of the world, both the natural and the created world. Burton's pictures remind us of the pleasures of seeing, not just in glimpsing fragments, but in the deep, sustained attention that our society so desperately needs. This is Burton's unique contribution.

Daniel A. Siedell
Curator/Interim Director

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 137.

3. Mihaly Cslkszentmihalyl, "Why We Need Things," in S. Lubar and W.D. Kingery, eds. *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 23.

4. A. Hofstadter, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by Martin Heidegger (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

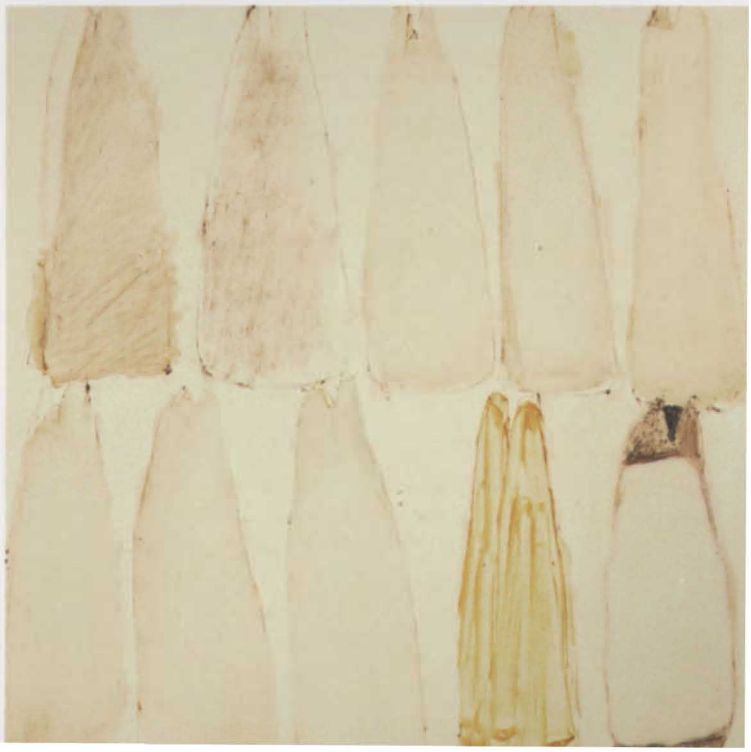

fig. 2, *Giant Bottle*, 1999,
oil on paper,
Courtesy of the artist

fig. 5, *Same But Different*, 1998,
oil on paper,
Courtesy of the artist

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. GREEN BOWL
   1990, oil on paper
   22 x 30 in.
   Courtesy of Lynne Boyer

2. STILL LIFE WITH PLUMS
   1990, oil on canvas
   31 x 52 in.
   Courtesy of F. Woods and Marcia Haecker

3. RECTANGLE
   1993, oil on canvas
   8 1/4 x 8 1/4
   Courtesy of Jon and Margaret Nelson

4. ELEVATOR TOP II
   1995, oil on paper
   24 x 32 in.
   Courtesy of Clay and Beth Smith

5. CIGAR BOXES AND BLACK EGG
   1996, oil and mixed media on canvas
   16 x 14 in.
   Courtesy of Ron and Sharon Gustafson

6. CARROT
   1994, oil on paper
   15 3/8 x 14 3/8 in.
   Courtesy of the Haydon Gallery

7. HAY BALES I
   1998, oil on paper
   32 3/8 x 26 3/8 in.
   Courtesy of the artist

8. SAME BUT DIFFERENT
   1998, oil on paper
   32 3/8 x 26 3/8 in.
   Courtesy of the artist

9. CHANNEL
   1999, oil on canvas
   20 x 20 in.
   Courtesy of the artist

10. TWENTY VASES ON TWENTY TABLES
    1999, oil on canvas
    20 x 20 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

11. HOUSE AND SKY
    1999, oil on masonite
    11 7/8 x 11 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

12. FOUR SIDED GRATER
    1999, oil on paper
    21 5/8 x 17 5/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

13. EGG
    1999, oil on masonite
    12 7/8 x 9 7/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

14. GIANT BOTTLE
    1999, oil on paper
    26 3/8 x 25 3/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

15. PINK
    1999, oil on masonite
    12 7/8 X 9 7/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

16. SCOOP
    1999, oil on masonite
    12 7/8 x 9 7/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

17. MICKEY
    1994, oil on canvas
    10 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.
    Courtesy of John and Leigh Hoppe Jr.

18. UNTITLED
    1992, oil on canvas
    48 x 36 in.
    Courtesy of Keith Jacobshagen and Paula Day

19. CIGAR BOX
    1998, oil on canvas
    59 x 47 in.
    Courtesy of anonymous lender

20. HAY BALES II
    1998, oil on canvas
    66 1/2 x 66 1/2 in.
    Courtesy of anonymous lender

21. ISLANDS
    1999, oil on canvas
    20 x 20 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

22. ASSORTMENT
    1999, oil on canvas
    48 x 48 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

23. TOP WEIGHT
    1990, monotype
    32 3/8 x 26 3/8 in.
    Courtesty of the artist

24. FOR CONFINEMENT
    1999, monotype
    25 x 30 7/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

25. STANLEY
    1999, oil on masonite
    12 7/8 x 9 7/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

26. GLASS AND SPOON
    1999, oil on masonite
    12 7/8 x 9 7/8 in.
    Courtesy of the artist

Cover illustration: fig. 1, *Egg*, 1999, oil on masonite, Courtesy of the artist

All photographs courtesy of John Spence.

Sheldon Solo is an ongoing series of one-person exhibitions by nationally-recognized contemporary artists. As a museum of twentieth-century American art, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery recognizes its responsibility to present both a historical perspective and the art of our time. Each Sheldon Solo exhibition assesses the work of an artist who has contributed to the spectrum of American art, and provides an important forum for the understanding of contemporary art issues.

The Sheldon Solo series is supported in part by the Nebraska Art Association, an independent charitable organization dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska through educational and cultural enrichment opportunities. Nebraska Art Association programs are supported in part by a Basic Support Grant from the Nebraska Arts Council, a State agency.

Additional general operating support is provided to the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership, and a lifetime of learning. Sheldon Gallery is fully accredited by the American Association of Museums.

We would like to express our thanks to George W. Neubert, former director of the Sheldon Art Gallery, whose sustained interest in and commitment to Judith Burton's work led him to organize this solo exhibition before his departure.

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