

Light and Shadow, Shifting with Time

Seamless work belies Martenson's methodical, disciplined approach

BY JOE BENDIK

In music, the smallest change often has the greatest effect. For example, in Handel's "Halleluia" chorus, just altering the rhythm and accenting each syllable differently each time elevates what could have been a mere catchy melody to a masterpiece. The same can be said of the paintings of Douglas Martenson.

I previously wrote about some of Martenson's work in a group exhibition in April. At that time, he was showing his landscapes. The theme was "painting as poetry" and he certainly had a poet's touch in the way that he coaxed the eye to follow various elements of the landscape. In his current exhibition *Inside-Outside: Taking Another Look*, Martenson explores the areas between the interior and exterior spaces.

Painting interiors has been his focus for a number of years, and he considers these works to be his most personal. Martenson treats his interiors like landscapes, concerning himself with light and relating all objects to one another.

Specifically, Martenson treats light and shadows like maps, a way of marking time and space that provides a sense of continuity and movement. Although his work appears seamless and effortless, he has a methodical, disciplined approach. He paints his interiors directly from real life (as opposed to a photograph). After careful consideration, Martenson decides on the best time of day for the light source. At this point, he'll document the original lighting by marking it with paint. Henceforth, the lights and shadows all come from this reference, since the actual light is constantly changing and shifting with time. He meticulously tracks the direction of light to vary the tonal aspects of the painting.

In his painting *Shell Game*, Martenson ups the ante. By bringing a lamp into the picture, he utilizes two light sources (he said that the lamp is a metaphor for knowledge). This results in a tour de force, as Martenson explores the way light changes and moves. Martenson explains: "I set up this scene in my studio. I wanted to use this heppelwhite table that I got from my grandmother and set it against this strong light that comes in from the window in the late afternoon. This created a great conflict with the lamp light and an opportunity to observe the differing light on the objects on the floor. These have to be developed by always being aware of transitions."

This is just one of the ways Martenson transforms the still-life genre from a mere rendering to high art. In the window, one catches a glimpse of a landscape. There is a painting within the painting as well, with the same type of distant perspective (which connects it thematically the entire exhibition). All of the focus is on the light/shadow patterns and the main focal point is these shells.

As a subtext, *Shell Game* could have dual interpretations: as a study of trickery from those in power, or a reference to painting itself being a con. After all, art is artifice. ☞

Douglas Martenson
*Inside-Outside: Taking Another
Look, Recent Realist Interiors and
Landscape Paintings*
Through Oct. 25

Sherry French Gallery, Inc.
Starrett-Lehigh Building,
13th floor, 601 W. 26th St.
212-647-8867,
www.sherryfrenchgallery.com



Shell Game, Douglas Martenson, oil on linen 2008.

Courtesy Sherry French Gallery, New York, NY