

The Charming References of Anne Connell

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Anne Connell, "The Token," Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

OMNP has been bubbling recently over the paintings of Anne Connell. Our colleague Stephen Ongpin just turned us on to some of her recent Renaissance-inspired work, which will be exhibited at his London gallery this upcoming Monday, November 2nd through Saturday, November 21st.

Formalist concerns have been ever apparent in contemporary painting's dialogue with Old Masters. The gravity of past artistic greatness weighs heavily on those who attempt

to bring it back without it becoming a shallow nostalgic tribute. Artists like John Currin and Kehinde Wiley have made their mark through conventional post-modern appropriation—sampling aspects of Old Masters and pairing them with disparate sources. In Wiley’s work, admiration for the inner-city black male is fleshed out through the nobility of the Old World. In Currin’s work smut meets the 16th century, and classicism becomes perverted, literally and figuratively.

While such statements are striking initially, after a while they begin to feel like innovation that is piecemeal. It’s like listening to a good dj mashup. Ingenious upon the first few listens, but destined to becoming contrived. Currin and Wiley are too talented as painters to avoid falling into this trap, however the cautionary measures that they take leaves their work feeling calculated at times, too concerned with being original.



Anne Connell, "Eclogue," Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

There’s less presence of such ego in Connell’s work, and that is what makes them charming. Her soft palette and muted brushwork is the understated style of a humble artisan, not someone out to blow people out of the water. In turn, specific Old Master motifs feel less like intellectual masturbation, and more like ornamental markers that invite our eyes in. A work like “The Token” (above) is not so much about referencing a Paolo Uccello or a trompe-l’oeil, but rather about their respective qualities of clarity and curiosity.

“Anne Connell’s exquisitely rendered fragments of Italian Renaissance paintings reveal both a knowledge of and a fascination with that period’s values, symbols and—most importantly—its conventions of illusion. Only rarely does the modern world seem to intrude into these vivid, jewel-like compositions, rich with gold leaf and Latin inscription. Still, on closer examination, Connell’s work reveals itself to be as firmly based in much

more recent developments in art as it is in the time-honored tradition of easel painting as a window into another world. Like many of her contemporaries, she appropriates from a variety of sources, often combining images to create works that celebrate a balance of beauty and intellectual substance...Like puzzles or poems, the exegesis of her tiny, exquisite panels requires time and attention."

from: "Anne Connell: Paintings," Stephen Ongpin Fine Art, Riverside House, 6 Mason's Yard, Duke Street, St. James's, London, 2nd to 21st November, 2009 [Stephen Ongpin Fine Art]