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William Leavitt
Cycladic Figures
Honor Fraser Gallery
September 9 - October 21, 2017

By Jody Zellen



Depending on how one enters William Leavitt's installation *Cycladic Figures*, one either first confronts paintings or tableaux that in many ways are three-dimensional realizations of Leavitt's two-dimensional worlds. Leavitt's mixed media works— *Lennie's Set*, 2016, *Faraday Cage*, 2015 and *Time Granule Generator*, 2016— become inhabitable spaces that give dimensionality to the contained and fragmented presentations of invented spaces in the paintings and drawings. However, even when presented with “real” objects arranged in space, the meaning of the work is never quite tangible. Leavitt is a master at creating artworks— no matter what the medium— with recognizable elements that never quite cohere.

Leavitt is a clever appropriationist taking bits and pieces from this and that to create his quasi-narrative works. *Cycladic Figures* (after de Chirico), 2016 is a painting of two statue heads against a darkened sky and distant horizon. The heads recall Cycladic idols as well as de Chirico's paintings of couples as in *Lovers*, 1960 from which Leavitt

borrowing this composition. He is also a skilled draftsman and a facile painter with a keen wit and the ability to create meaning through uncanny juxtapositions. In *Memory Cutouts* (lawn chair, mercury, phone, hairdo, bridge, poplars), 2017, Leavitt creates a dreamlike narrative against a CMYK speckled background featuring a blond-haired girl, gazing into the distance, perhaps across the bridge that occupies the lower center of the painting toward a treelined path. Maybe she imagines or remembers using a black dial telephone to invite a friend to sit in the two bright green deckchairs in the painting's upper left corner. How do these elements connect? As in most of Leavitt's paintings, meaning is elusive.

Many of the works in his exhibition use the motif of two busts in silhouette as a container that divides the foreground and background space. These figures occupy most of the picture plane. In the aptly titled, *Virtual Reality*, 2017 Leavitt covers two heads with small black and white vignettes. In one a softly painted couple is depicted from behind, walking toward an equestrian statue in a park. In the other more crisp depiction seen from above, the man and woman are separated yet their long shadows visually connect them. In this riff on technology, Leavitt suggests what might be seen on two different planes—i.e., *Virtual Reality*. Similarly, in *Head Space*, 2017 he fills the silhouettes with disparate objects—jacks, dice, a hat, a dress, glasses, as well as a water pipe and an old-fashioned phone. How these objects resonate for the figures remains a mystery. But for Leavitt that is the point. New and old objects co-exist in Leavitt's world. In *SwingerBoxSled*, 2015 he juxtaposes an old model Polaroid camera with a wooden sled and an open cardboard box. These “things” exist in the landscape—blue sky, green grass—among rock-like formations that allude to human forms.

Leavitt likes to play and challenge viewers. His works are seductive and while at first glance familiar, the familiarity leads to no conclusions. Instead Leavitt presents the known to suggest the unknown and the imagined possibility where the real becomes surreal.

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