

ART PAPERS

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ERIK SANDBERG WASHINGTON

The exhibition title *Contrary* refers to Erik Sandberg's attitude towards recent painting as much as to his ostensible theme—the opposition of virtue and vice [Conner Contemporary Art; September 25—October 28, 2006]. In fact, Sandberg's full-bodied, allegorical realism also puts him at odds with his peers—think of Dana Schutz's expressionist figuration, for instance.

Working in oil glaze on wood panel, Sandberg's realistic treatment of near-human-scaled figures comes as a surprise. In the past, his dark satires, alluding to Bruegel and the grotesque tradition of Northern European painting, were often notebook sized. More complex, multi-figured narratives like *Channel*, 2006, on display at Conner but not part of the new series, were also of a modest scale.

The new work renders six of the traditional Christian Seven Virtues and Seven Deadly Sins as stark, double-sided character studies. The figures pose like photography models in bare interior settings, caught in a heightened moment of triumph or failure. While the figures are solid and full-bodied, the backgrounds dissolve into scumbled spaces, suggesting that the figures stand in for an abstract notion of morality.

Consider *Courage/Cowardice*, 2006, where a young naked woman in knee-length stockings represents the virtue. She poses as Donatello's *David* with sword and flexed knee. Reinforced by a chilly blue wall, her cool musculature undercuts her pert sexiness. Cowardice, whose head also appears at Courage's feet, is treated as a deformed man in white boxers, barely able to hold his raised machete.

In a taped interview accompanying the show, Sandberg explains that the virtues and vices attracted him as moral representations and that, avoiding Christian didactics, he often identified with vice rather than virtue. Certainly, Sandberg's reversal of traditional values produces a nuanced reading. If physical beauty was synonymous with moral wholeness in the past, then *Cowardice* is an extremely subtle portrait because

Sandberg based the figure, in part, on his own father who has a disfiguring disease. Reviewers have often compared Sandberg's work to John Currin's amoral production. The work of mythic realist Odd Nerdrum is closer to Sandberg pursuit's in its quest for a new reading of traditional icons.

Indeed, the portraits could be kitschy, eroticized parables. Unlike Sandberg's earlier work, where physically exaggerated victims suffered grotesque fates, the realism of his new figures casts virtue and vice as psychological states. Hence, *Charity*, 2006, is a wry portrait of a self-possessed dame who, sporting a stole, black gloves, and panties, carries a gallon of milk. Her partner *Avarice*, 2006, a haunted woman in a girdle, hoards a glass globe filled with eggs. Curiously, Sandberg's virtues stare off into space or turn inward while his vices tend to gaze directly at us, demanding recognition if not approval.

Significantly, Sandberg also approaches his work quite sculpturally. Not only are the figures muscular and three-dimensional, but he also often sets them on low fluted pedestals or privileged spaces like plots of grass wrapped in steel bands. He pushes the sculptural format even farther by mounting the portraits as double-sided panels. In fact, despite the figures' intimate scale and physical immediacy, each has the aura of a personalized grave stele. This allusion to death and memorialization—an ironic meditation on absence that cancels out the works' sculptural presence—is perhaps the biggest surprise of this striking, unusual show.

Sandberg has taken a big step forward, with a certain amount of self-deprecating hubris. His new work's format demands the kind of exhibition space found in museums, but are these institutions interested in allegorical realism? Certainly, they should be interested in Erik Sandberg's.

—George Howell