

BOSTON

Ann Toebe

STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY

Though each of the nine works in Ann Toebe's "Housekeeping" exhibition resonates with the discourse of authenticity often assigned to the craft-based, naive/folk style that characterizes her aesthetic, one would be hard-pressed to identify a specific emotional tenor or affective viewpoint in the mundane trappings of the interiors that her paintings depict. The china gracing the dining room shelves, the hand-made baubles keeping company with technological devices in the living



room, the cookware splayed across the kitchen counter—rather than alluding to some kind of conjugal psychodrama, Toebe's vignettes seem subsumed by an extensive process of accounting and accountability, a systematic inventory of actions necessary to keep an ordered home (washing, dusting, vacuuming, polishing, as the various titles specify) and a matter-of-fact index of idioms and techniques that have long constituted the operative matrix of painting.

Using oil and gouache (applied directly to the panel or canvas, or, alternatively, to paper that is then cut and glued to the material support), Toebe represents the interiors of modern-day suburban homes in works such as *Dining Room Dusty*, 2009, and *The Ex-Wife's Plants and Things*, 2010, as if they were collapsed three-dimensional architectural maquettes: doors, window frames, and walls that correspond to the medium's planarity by occupying a visual space that coincides more or less with the work's surface. This formal insistence continues on the level of patterning, as with *The Ex-Wife's Pies and Things*, 2010, in which the cabinet's striped wooden veneer, the piecrust's cross-hatching, and the kitchen floor's rectangular tiling wryly enunciate the gridded compositional structure that sustains each painting.

Paradoxically, this same overabundance of signs, which serves as a visual treatise on modernist optics, also fabricates a raucously decorative rejoinder. For example, in four separate depictions of the same dining room, pure swatches of flat green paint limn the canvas's perimeter only to be interrupted by ornately configured renderings of domestic elements such as post-backed wooden chairs, crocheted doilies, and stained glass windows. Although the base composition remains more or less the same across all four works, a slightly different color palette has been used for each, evoking, among other precedents, Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square." Such a convergence of visual art theory and traditional techniques describes a multidisciplinary

approach to art espoused by the institutions where he taught, namely the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College. Such reverence for the cross-pollination of abstraction and craft crops up repeatedly in Toebe's work, whether in the multicolored, latticed carpet depicted in *Study for the Ex-Wife's Plants and Things* or the expressive explosion of luminous glasswork in *Beating the Rug* (both works 2010).

This particular interstice in the history of twentieth-century painting, though certainly dominant in Toebe's project, opens to a broader exploration of the extended valence of the modernist aesthetic. What do we make, for instance, of her transposition of Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*, 1912, to a suburban kitchen table, or her transformation of Henri Matisse's exoticized vegetal motifs into ordinary household plants? Though some may scoff at this apparent post-modernist pastiche, Toebe's paintings differ greatly from earlier flirtations with ahistoricity. To the contrary, her "housekeeping" is a precise and methodical removal of the thick cobwebs occluding modernism's multiple histories to reveal the many stylistic and conceptual layers that constitute and continue to animate its matrix.

—Nuit Banai