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GALLERIES

Steiger Gets Maximum Impact From Minimalist Landscapes

By Margaret Hawkins
June 29, 2007



William Steiger, *Caboose #2*, 2007, oil on linen, 20 x 30

Selective viewing is essential to sanity. The human brain can only process so much information at once, and those whose brains don't shuffle, edit and erase most of what they see and hear go mad. Order makes understanding possible.

On the opposite end of this spectrum of perception is painter **William Steiger**, the owner of an orderly eye if ever there were one, who selects only the most pleasing and succinct details from a tacky and complicated American landscape and paints those in flat color and high relief against otherwise blazingly blank backgrounds of whiteness.

Cable cars hang in mid-air, held up by the thinnest of wires. Watertowers—those lighthouses of the prairies, skyscrapers of the great plains—stand stark against blank white skies. Rollercoasters, Ferris wheels, railroad bridges, tunnels: These are Steiger's humble icons of perfection. A train caboose is reduced to an abstract pileup of geometric shapes in red, black and gray. The apparently sun-bleached walls of a grain elevator disappear in the whiteness of the background.

The effect of this minimalizing technique is almost musical, the isolated objects look the way a few notes sound when they are surrounded by silence. The white acts as a pause that allows us to “hear” the thing because Steiger has eliminated so much environmental detail. Fashioned with the same attention to precision that designers gave to the machines and buildings that inspired Steiger in the first place, each painting is a perfect invention.

Together, the body of work seems like an homage to the mathematics of engineering, with each object illuminated by a cleansing, almost blinding light and without a trace of human presence or sentiment.

Steiger's work approaches abstraction in places and there is a sense here that if a few more edges were removed, the literal meanings of these paintings would dissolve into planes of flat color. It is Steiger's genius, though, that they don't have to lose their literalness to keep our attention.

Steiger has set the ideas in his paintings in motion and then he steps back to admire his craft and to watch them work. Refreshingly, there is no sense of heated artistic ego or creative chaos here. Just the opposite—Steiger makes paintings that instill a cool sense of order.