

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Jess and Elizabeth Bishop: 'Objects and Apparitions'

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Published: January 12, 2012

You can view this pairing of two dense, historically fascinating shows as almost criminal overscheduling or an embarrassment of riches, but it is not to be missed. The theme shared by the display of little-known paintings (at least on the East Coast) by the eccentric San Francisco painter and collagist Jess (1923-2004) and of artworks and objects made collected or inherited by the poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-79) is the often polymorphous nature of talent.



While Jess is perhaps best known for obsessive collages and strangely baked-looking, seemingly paint-by-numbers realist paintings, this exhibition of works primarily from the 1950s and '60s concentrates on his less familiar wanderings through the late-19th-century French Symbolist-Nabi nexus of Redon, Vuillard and Bonnard and a freewheeling curiosity about the physical possibilities of paint.

There's a quiet wildness to the way he moves from thin washes in the Bonnard-like "Four O'Clock Shadow of Purple Papier Mâché" to the exuberant "Petals of Paint." Arcadian, sometimes homoerotic scenes of nudes in landscapes alternate with depictions of models in contemporary dress and settings that recall San Francisco contemporaries like Richard Diebenkorn and David Park. Each work seems to have a different idea about how paint can convey a legible image of some sort while remaining aggressively itself in terms of tactility, light and color. The show is a revelation.



Meanwhile, the small back gallery offers a minor feast of Bishopiana, assembled from Bishop's estate. She was a master of linguistic lucidity and the keenly observed, often epiphanic detail. But her visual acuteness also yielded small paintings on paper that recorded her immediate surroundings wherever she spent time, in France, New York, South America or Key West, Fla.

Working in combinations of gouache, watercolor, ink and graphite, she created still lifes, interiors and views of houses and buildings that fuse great linear bones with radiant colors and quiet celebration with wit. Examples here include a bouquet of pansies sharing a checkered tablecloth with two books, a modest courthouse crowded by palm trees and telephone wires and a tombstone-maker's shop beneath a flowering tree.

The exhibition also includes an attempt at assemblage that reflects Bishop's admiration for Joseph Cornell; two paintings by the Key West primitive painter Gregorio Valdes as well as folk-art sculptures of South American derivation. But beyond Bishop's own art, the most resonant inclusion is the small, skillful undated oil sketch by her great-uncle George Hutchinson that records a view of the Nova Scotia farm where she spent the happiest years of her childhood and inspired her 64-line "Poem," published in *The New Yorker* in 1972. Toward the conclusion of this homage to immediate and remembered visual experience, one line especially encapsulates Bishop's sensibility: "how live, how touching in detail."

Through Jan. 21