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Momentousness: The Still Life Paintings of Susan Jane Walp

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Glass Vase with Etruscan Kantharos and Drapery, 2014, oil on gessoed paper, 9 ½ x 11 3/8 inches

In her still life paintings, Susan Jane Walp exhibits a unique way of blending the delicate with the dynamic, and the empathetic with the strategic. The artist clearly has a predilection for square, nearly symmetrical compositions viewed from above, with a single colorful object – a bowl of blueberries, or half of a sliced orange – placed icon-like at center. Supporting the bowl physically, and visually surrounding it, there might be a sheet or two of paper, accompanied by a kitchen knife, scrunchie or other familiar object. Though subtle in color and modeling, her paintings hum with a singleness of purpose. The artist renders all of these atmospherically, so that an airy depth seems to hover around her objects. Small movements acquire a palpable dimension: the lip of a bowl rises sturdily above a handful of nuts, and one can almost hear the rustling of the papers beneath. These images feel devotional, but in an artistic rather than clerical fashion. Walp seems dedicated ultimately less to symbolism than to the manner in which forms emerge as momentous optical events.

Walp's fifth show with Tibor de Nagy is the first to concentrate on works on paper. On close inspection, a number of the paintings reveal a slightly looser approach, with brushier marks and portions of the ground showing through the

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ESTABLISHED 1950

brushstrokes. But their attitude closely follows that of the artist's paintings on canvas. Walp's strongest suit remains her empathy for her subjects and her gift for characterizing them with color and discreet detail, and these animate the nearly square and symmetrical painting *Three Zinnias in a Glass of Water* (2012), with its vivid portrayal of blossoms – swirling pressures of orange tints and deeper reds — that shift like small galaxies above the reflecting facets of a vase.

Some works, however, depart from the usual square format. *Gerbera I* (2014) captures with especial vigor the effect of a single flower sprouting through space. And, more strikingly, some of the recent works completely cast aside the strategy of near-symmetry. In several, oppositions of objects across the surface replace the concentric arrays. In *Glass Vase with Etruscan Kantharos and Drapery* (2014), for example, two objects – a bowl with long, diverging twin handles, and a narrow-necked vase – compete from either side to dominate the center. The artist has reduced her palette to grayed blue-greens and earth hues, but she has made every one of them count. Weighted by their particular density of color, each movement takes on a subtle pictorial urgency. The extravagant gestures of the bowl handles, stretching through space, encounter and barely overtake the broader, sturdier arc of a background fabric on one side, and the rim of the vase – a thin ellipse, tightening beneath the handle's swoop – on the other. The objects become distinct, not through illustrational methods but, rather, through the counter-play of their internal energies.



Gerbera I, 2014, oil on gessoed paper, 11 ½ x 10 inches

At a few points in the exhibition, the strategizing of forms eclipses their actual rhythmic potential: a vase's brim may coincide, all too statically, with the top of a box. Occasionally colors depict rather than embody pictorial events. But the best paintings here confirm what we may have already suspected of Walp's work, which is that its power derives



Three Zinnias in a Glass of Water, 2012, oil on gessoed paper, 9 ¾ x 9 3/8 inches

not from a strategy of centered, symmetric arrays but through something more intuitive: a comprehension of the rhythmic character of her subjects. This would be a painter's truest kind of devotion, not one of merely assigning symbols of significance but of uncovering the momentousness of the purely visual.