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P R E S S R E L E A S E



"The Excited Self" (2005-6), part of a solo exhibition of small-canvas works by Mark Greenwold that runs through Saturday.

A Painter's Painter, Working With a Cast of Big Heads

By ROBERTA SMITH

It is instructive to imagine the D C Moore Gallery's 10-year survey of Mark Greenwold's small, fraught Realist paintings in one of New York's major museums. Such a fantasy points up how narrowly even the best art institutions tend to define contemporary art, and how easily and rewardingly those strictures might be stretched.

Mr. Greenwold's fastidiously made, this-is-my-life images would draw lively interest from a diverse audience. And they would say something fresh about the tense interplay of tradition, innovation and personal necessity that fuels most art.

But at 65 Mr. Greenwold has no profile on the current auction scene, in white-hot galleries or in the halls of academe. He has no Conceptual street cred and no waiting list. He is well known to other artists of a certain age; Chuck Close has painted his portrait. (It is owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is now on view there.) But his reputation is definitely that of the painter's-painter variety.

The surface madness of Mr. Greenwold's painting method and the images that result may not help his visibility. He works slowly and obsessively on small canvases, rarely completing more than two or three works a year.

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The process suits the impact of his raw, if inexplicable, family dramas, which feature himself, his children and his current girlfriends, with cameo appearances by relatives, friends (sometimes depicted as hybrid lizards, pigeons or insects) and pets. Mr. Greenwold tends to depict himself as imperious and humiliated. Usually naked (except for shoes) or wearing a bathrobe or women's garments, he floats slightly above or stands off to one side, as if revisiting the action in a memory or from the couch of his therapist, who's also sometimes present. All of the heads are a little too large for their bodies (when human), which emphasizes the primacy of thought and feeling and also enhances the claustrophobic atmosphere.

The panoply of luxurious interiors casts the big-headed figures as a well-heeled commune trekking from Fifth Avenue to Northern California, from Paris to Venice. Lifted from high-end shelter magazines, these overdone settings heat up the mood. They also convert the figures to uneasy, collagelike presences and provide an inexhaustible range of stuff to detail. In the end Mr. Greenwold makes the inanimate almost as alive as the animate.

Ultimately Mr. Greenwold's stipples, dots and dashes of glowing colors provide the real sense of comfort, something to sink into. They also form a latter-day Seurat-like Pointillism — even if his unforgiving depictions of skin and wrinkles evoke the Magic Realist Ivan Albright.

The conflation of the physical and the abstract is a little unsettling. In "The Failure of Love" (1999-2000) the radiant, radiating pattern of Mr. Greenwold's chest hair recalls Mondrian's semi-abstract trees. The most recent works feature colorfully abstract "thought balloons" hovering above the heads. In "The Excited Self" (2005-6) there's only one, large and tumultuous with a fierce, masklike face (a self of its own).

The painting's surfaces and abstract tangles provide respite from what Mr. Greenwold, in the catalog's self-interview, aptly calls his art's "emotional cubism" (using the critic James Wood's phrase). As the eye boomerangs from face to face, trying to make sense of things, the surfaces invite (and reward) a concentration very much like the one that created them.

This small-scale painterliness, encountered where a pristine glasslike surface might be expected, keeps Mr. Greenwold's art fresh, as does his sharpening of the tensions always at large in figurative painting. The point is that no art style or medium is ever over. It may be on life support or in remission, but resuscitation is always possible, often using techniques that are among the oldest in the books.

"Mark Greenwold: A Moment of True Feeling 1997-2007" is on view through Saturday at D C Moore Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street; (212) 247-2111.