

SARAH CANRIGHT

Curated by Nic Nicosia

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The greyhound is the sole subject of all paintings in Sarah Canright's eponymously titled exhibition. Before one even recognizes this, however, one is overwhelmed by the monumental presence of her work (although none of the paintings exceed 70 by 80 inches). The viewer, long before perusing images up close to determine how they were made, is compelled to view the works from afar, simply in order to account for their perceived size.

Most of the paintings—excepting “Watteau” (2007) and “Merlin” (2011)—are formatted vertically. By pushing her compositions to maximize the images' frontality and subjectivity, Canright achieves a sense of monumentality that belies the actual dimensions of her images and canvases. By reducing her palette to essential earth colors—transparent yellow ocher over burnt sienna, Venetian red mixed with black for the tonalities, and a surprised (and surprising) cerulean blue and dark green combination—and by using them sparingly, she generates a field of painted luminous white. Divergent sculptural forms—geometric and natural, sensuous swellings of small and large elements—coexist in the work, and Canright negotiates them with precision and aplomb. For example, in “His Song” (2010), the elevated view of a greyhound's head and two enclosed feet is placed about two inches to the right of the painting's vertical axis, yet the center of the bridge of the dog's nose is located precisely at the horizontal halfway point. Moreover, the slight alteration of what appear to be symmetrical ears pitted against the two upper corners of the canvas enhance subtle asymmetrical treatments throughout the painting, and further the austerity and inventiveness of the form as a whole. Identical in dimension to “His Song” (78 by 42 inches), “Huckleberry” (2011) displays a diametrically opposite use of motion. The underside of the greyhound's chin thrusts upward, as if in a howl, his nose towering at the painting's pinnacle. Yet, the dark background sliced with a vertical white stripe and two broken blue curves on either side of the large head pull the gravity down. Both paintings evidence Canright's considerable facility with subtly complex spatial distribution.

Her balance between quality of line and idiosyncratically modeled form is equally noteworthy.

Form the two ears (the best ears painted in recent decades) on the top of “Mars” (2011), which unexpectedly transform into two sacred flowers, to the bottom of the nearly symmetrical head and feet—rendered with a touch of chiaroscuro by simply blurring the edges—the image is pushed into a flamelike atmosphere while remaining cloaked in moderate obscurity. Another accomplishment is the wonderful use of diagonals in “Descent” (2011). Overall, each painting exhibits simultaneous binary tensions: abstract versus representative, stasis versus momentary, weighty versus light, tender versus expressive. More importantly, when called upon to feel profound affection for an animal, one comes away with an acute awareness of life and morality; this kind of insight is necessary to maintain one's own equilibrium. That is to say Canright's paintings force us to slow down as we realize more and more things are revealed, gradually, in that act of slow looking. Furthermore, the commitment to paint with such difficult and uncompromising subject matter and to show it to the world is by itself a courageous act.

