

GIGI MILLS: THIS LIFE

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GIGI MILLS WAS RAISED IN A FAMILY OF CIRCUS-MEN, HAS NO FORMAL ART

training, and developed a painting style that's unavoidably derivative of Milton Avery, who painted in the early twentieth century. At times, Mills and Avery are differentiated only by each other's timeliness. Avery was considered the American Matisse (with whom he was close friends) and aided in the transition from representation to color-field abstraction. Mills learned by studying the masters and resumes this artistic legacy today with an echoing repertoire typically composed of, as Mark Rothko said of Avery, "a domestic, unheroic cast."

There are superficial similarities: both artists sign their name with sgraffito marks rather than additional paint and both reference their immediate surroundings through flat, reduced, geometric shapes painted in thin layers with little detail, and still, nearly anonymous figures. Mills distinguishes herself through spare and well-incorporated collaged elements, and although Avery occasionally used muted colors, Mills uses them consistently. Her recent show, *This Life*, is nearly monochromatic with a few color accents, and

these formal divisions illuminate Mills's slightly macabre, sometimes superimposed world with a certain limelight.

The Pianist's Birthday is particularly dark and looks more like a funeral than a party, despite the birthday cake, but even that looks anything but celebratory. It's a black blob that doesn't even pass for chocolate and is decorated by dabbed white flowers. The pianist is downcast and barely notices this single notion of nativity before him. His female comrade, though next to him, does nothing to engage socially. Her back faces us and her black sleeveless dress announces her skin with vampiric paleness, white and ghostly. The piano declares an uninterrupted silence without its player. The most jovial gesture cannot ignite this party, which lacks actions and has a complacent and fashionable decadence characteristic of the Victorian fin de siècle.

The grand piano features in a few other paintings, where a wistful woman faces it with mysterious gravity. *Piano, Chair and Woman* shows a bare room blocked out in

grey rectangles with the same grand but bleak instrument. We see a sitting chair in the foreground with a quickly rendered paisley pattern and the back of a cloaked woman. All three objects take equal precedence and their dynamic is aloof while the whole image verges on abstraction. The paint is thin and the composition is lyrical but removed, even anachronistic. Not even Avery, who was born in 1885, uses such specific cultural codes, and in fact his figures look more contemporary than Mills'.

Collaged additions are obvious and charmingly awkward in the upturned fingers and dress hem of the black female saint in *Saint and Dog/Field of Birds*. The heroine looks more childlike than saintly and is homely dressed, holding two doves against a scribbled yellow backdrop that's punctuated by the whole flock of shiny white birds. It's a particularly action-packed scene by Mills: the birds flutter around, the saint eyes the canine, and the canine braces for interaction.

Avery's concern with color clearly pioneered modern

abstraction and his domestic, unheroic cast were almost pawns in the process. *Sketchers by the Stream* (1951) and *Maternity* (1950) are great examples of this transition from figuration to color-blocked abstraction. Mills' painting *Sleeping Near the Shallows* is the piece most closely teetering on this, at times, very thin line. With a few less sgraffito marks, there would cease to be a man or dog. Her concern with reducing objects to their basic form is clear and she says that painting should also have a "psychological and aesthetic weight to hold the viewer, to entice them to keep coming back." Her composition and palette bear this burden that is relieved by the whimsical Matisse patterning and her playful layers of collage. *This Life* is both dour and innocent and illustrates an idealistic, oddly Victorian Arcadia that is curiously posited as contemporary—it is not this life at all. Her paintings express a childlike facture that's decoratively morbid and almost her own.

—HANNAH HOEL



Gigi Mills, *Sleeping Near the Shallows*, oil on linen, 16" x 20", 2014