

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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northern california art

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Gale Antokal @ Patricia Sweetow

David M Roth



"Ascension 1", 2011 chalk pastel on paper 45.5 x 32"

Strategies for expressing loss, dislocation, memory and mortality have varied enormously over the past generation — from the angst-ridden Neo-Expressionist techniques we saw in the '80s, to the resurgence of painterly abstraction of '90s to the knowingly naïve street art we've witnessed in the past decade. Gale Antokal employs a distressed, quasi-academic drawing technique that owes nothing to these earlier formulations. Her art, which appears to be photo-based, recalls the "thoughtography" of Ted Serios, a Chicago bellhop who, when drunk, had the singular ability to telepathically project mental images onto Polaroid film, with results ranging from wholly abstract to strikingly real.

Antokal's art occupies a space in between. Her black-and-white chalk pastel works dredge up gauzy memories that seem as elusive as pictures drawn in dust, yet they're imbued with enough specificity so that you can imagine yourself inside of them. In these lucid-dream drawings, people, birds, babies, horses and landscapes appear in milky cocoons, as if painted with fog and soot. Edges blur; figures dissolve. The effect is unsettling, and doubly so because the images appear so anodyne at first glance. They are everything but.

Galloping horses, whose riders seem to have evaporated, look like they're fleeing ghosts in *Departure 5*. *Accession 1* shows three figures climbing the steps of a building. The foreground figure's right leg is amputated at the knee. The background figure is a smudge. All appear resolute in their determination to keep walking. In *Bird on Cage*, the freed bird doesn't take flight; it stares into the void that occupies three quarters of the picture. *Aornos 9* shows a forlorn man trudging along a vacant urban waterfront clutching a plastic bag. The word *aornos* in Greek is said to mean "without birds". If that weren't stark enough, consider *Cold Tears 3*, the title Antokal assigns to a drawing of stalactites.

Taken singly, none of these pictures would register much impact; but grouped together in a small room, as they are here, they constitute a force field. For a comparably gimlet-eyed view of our ultimate fate you'd have to turn to Robinson Jeffers, the Carmel poet, who wrote: "And why do you cry, my dear, why do you cry? It is all in the whirling circles of time. If millions are born millions must die." He and Antokal, it seems, are birds of a feather.

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