

# William Harsh review: Painting, drawing for keeps

By **Kenneth Baker** Published 11:33 am, Friday, December 5, 2014



Photo: Unknown / Vessel Gallery



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“After Child’s Play” (2007), oil on canvas by William Harsh, shows s cheery grotesquerie.

Benicia painter **William Harsh** took to heart the lesson of his mentor **Philip Guston** that making a painting entails bringing something into two worlds: the one in which canvases pile up and studio space costs money and the parallel world of picture space, a realm of freedom where even the impossible may find a place.

With pride and a hint of reproach to the wider art world for not having taken more notice of the artist, Oakland's Vessel Gallery honors Harsh (1953-2012) with a second posthumous survey show. It contains paintings on canvas and works on paper that certify Harsh's versatility and creative restlessness.

The artistic example Guston (1913-1980) set and his personal magnetism posed every younger painter he encountered the problem of how to exit the force field of his influence.

Harsh never pretended otherwise. He openly paced the span of Guston's long shadow, borrowing some of his symbols along the way: frames, easels, drapery and other studio clutter. Some of the earliest images on paper in the Vessel show might almost be mistaken for Gustons.

Harsh also opened himself to some of Guston's own avowed influences: Picasso, **Max Beckmann**, early **Giorgio de Chirico**.

Looking at many of Harsh's paintings induces discomfort. You can feel the struggle in them, the effort of improvising something into fictive being and trying to make it credible in the way that only the delirium of heartfelt painting can.

And when he succeeded, as in a compact late piece such as the foot-square "After Child's Play" (2007) — ambiguous as to scale, setting, source and reference — the discomfort did not dissipate, it took on a flavor distinctive of Harsh's own sensibility, a kind of resigned yet cheery grotesquerie.

**James Elkins**, an art scholar who paints, recommends that to feel our way into a painter's vision, we re-enact the gestures that making a work apparently required of him. Whether executed from the shoulder or the wrist, those motions may be quite contorted, and we feel some of that contortion even in Harsh's most confident performances, such as "Mycenae" (2002), "Colony" (2009) and the monotype "Action Figure" (2010).

The effort we feel inscribed in Harsh's brushwork and drawing does not preclude elegance of touch or color handling. But it registers the difficulty of trying to satisfy the demands of two domains — the world from which we look and one into which we look, the picture space that at its truest defies — convincingly — the laws of literal possibility.

For Harsh, as for Guston, that sort of persuasiveness, producing sensations that we receive bodily, not just optically, was the real proof of painting's power as a de-distorting mirror, capable of throwing into relief the strangeness of reality to which we hasten to grow numb. Harsh searched for correlatives to the bafflement — how can this *be*? — that we risk experiencing whenever we ponder the circumstances of our existence.