

5/1/2019

“Jessie Homer French: Paintings 1978–2018”

by Martin Herbert



Jessie Homer French is a half-hidden treasure. Born in 1940, a consummate Los Angeleno (she and her husband working Hollywood on the agency side and apparently knew everyone) and avowed ‘regional narrative painter’, until recently she’s made art below the radar of non-cognoscenti. That Ed Ruscha has admired and collected her work might be deduced from *Urban Wildlife* (2013), a California panorama stretched to ultra-widescreen dimensions, replete with silhouetted palms and consumed by ruddy wildfire flames. The West’s combustibility has evidently preyed lengthily on Homer French’s mind—see the greyed-out, smoke-laden woodland in *Prescription Burn 1* (1993), whose burning seems not accidental but pre-emptive—but so have many other aspects of her locale. Subtly rapturous rhythms of nature, for instance, as evidenced in the spidery tracteries of black tree branches that spread abstractly in front of a pristine white building and deep blue skies in *Condo Gothic* (2004), or the redemptive aspects of proximity to mortality, as in the pulsing gridded speckle of grey gravestones across a cemetery’s plush hillside in *Funeral* (1978), with its simple, childlike figures standing stiffly, staring at a coffin heaped roundly with white and multicolored flowers in a greensward of death.

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Homer French doesn’t usually scout for big subject matter or even an unusually heralded by a deep-seated aptness of composition—in the local, transitory. Her fondness for angling pulses through *Dawn Trout on Rosachi Ranch—East Walker Nevada* (1991), with its little school of quicksilver brown fish shimmying leftward aid reeds below lavender-coloured flowers, maybe hollyhocks. The painting instinctively appeals because, in its schematic of stacked levels of nature, it has the innocence and immediacy of a children’s illustration yet is backed up by abstraction-inclined compositional nous. The visible world in these paintings appears continually to be collapsing into conversing pictorial elements, even in the many cases where mankind appears as an intruder, a toxic interference in nature, such as the trio of Stealth Bombers wheeling above a windfarm in *Airforce* (2014).

Here as elsewhere Homer French pitches her brushwork, which has the calm and guileless orderliness of Henri Rousseau, as the signature of a relative naif; this redoubles both her quietude and distress at human invasiveness. A pair of wall-mounted cutouts of dogs, one of which cradles a skunk in its mouth—Homer French apparently paints other people’s hounds for them, then keeps a duplicate for herself—scans like Alex Katz turning his attention away from people and trees for once, and underscores the air of sylvan civility, not to mention privilege. But their maker is also capable of beguiling orchestral complexity: *Berenice, Montecito Heights* (2017) is an aerial view of roadway-strafed Californian landscape to put up against David Hockney’s Mulholland Drive canvases, an intricate distribution of thoroughfares and low-rise buildings burrowing into bumpy green foilage while a hoary cityscape rises up behind. Cars tootle up one freeway, sodium lights glower on another, the perspective lurches and bucks and you’re here, on a relatively uneventful day, in a Los Angeles half of reality and half of the mind: the painter is clearly devoted to this place, but not blindly.