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“Jessie Homer French”
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Fires burn, fish swim, people die: Again and again, the art of Jessie Homer French returns to elemental facts of earthly existence. Mostly, her bittersweet, anti-pastoral paintings depict—and artfully distort—scenes of everyday life and death, culture and nature, in the landscapes close to her home in the hilly outskirts of La Quinta, California. Born in New York in 1940, Homer French has been a Golden State resident for much of the past four decades. During this time, she has cultivated a delicately cartoonish, self-taught painting style that responds to the bracing proximity of wilderness—the mountains, lakes, forests and deserts of her wider Coachella Valley area—and to areas of low-key human ritual and habitation at the margins of busier, more-built-up environments. Cemeteries, in this regard, are a typical subject: somber settings indicative of her enduring, dual interest in atmospheric edge-lands and extreme existential conditions. Her artistic disposition is not, however, doleful. Even when the principle content of a picture is ostensibly bleak—graveyards, funerals, mourners—her paintings have a saturated liveliness and formal eccentricity that lifts the mood or twists the tale.

Many of the bereaved in *Funeral*, 1978, wear, like Hamlet, “customary suits of solemn black.” Others, oddly, are in shining white. But between the gathered crowd and the gray-faced priest, the picture’s true surprise is the casket itself, majestically adorned with a vivid multitude of fiery blooms. Sometimes, in Homer French’s paintings—signed, often, with the shortened, resonant appellation HOMER—the dead appear along with the living, their buried bodies implausibly visible in the lower tier of a split-view composition. Underground, they seem safely preserved in their tidy rectangular coffins: neatly attired, for perpetuity, in either dark, sober suits or bright, cheerful summer dresses. Homer French’s Dublin exhibition “Paintings 1978–2018” was a modest, representative sample—or cross section—of her life’s off-center work, featuring fourteen variously sized canvases and highlighting several of her main stylistic inclinations and worldly preoccupations. Pictured places included, crucially, a graveyard—*Funeral* was the earliest of the selected pieces and, probably, the most beguiling—as well as fish farms, forest edges, suburban highways, and even, in *Airforce*, 2014, an expanse of desert, populated by both towering wind turbines and, bizarrely, a trio of looming stealth bombers. (A parallel Homer French show at Mother’s Tankstation’s London gallery focused on the menacing presence of these freaky machines in California’s desert skies.) At times, the most appealing quality of these paintings was the artist’s subjective, winningly unschooled way of seeing. In *The Nursery*, 1988, Homer French pays no heed to the rules of perspective as she positions a lone figure, clad in luminous workwear, among tanks teeming with fish; within the restrictive 2-D arrangement, the isolated farmhand seems more tightly contained than the

creatures he is feeding. Elsewhere, Homer French pares back her subjects in direct, powerful ways. The extraordinary fire burning behind a long, horizontal strip of buildings in *Urban Wildlife*, 2013—a composition indebted, surely, to fellow elective Californian Ed Ruscha—seems apocalyptic, all-consuming, inevitable. It's a violently beautiful small painting. But not all the works included were quite as potent or, as in other cases, peculiar. The title of *Condo Gothic*, 2004, makes clear the intent to cast a severe pall of gloom over its quotidian subject—pale modernist housing blocks viewed through a cluster of shadowed, leafless trees—yet the painting leaves us yearning for the occasional sparks of color that electrify her cemetery pictures. *Berenice, Montecito Heights*, 2017, is a splendidly realized burbs-to-city vista, full of finely wrought natural and architectural detail, but it's not an especially memorable scene. Still, each one of these paintings represents a distinctive, searching effort to see and understand a changing landscape. Forged over decades in close, sensitive contact with particular places—and in relative independence from the mainstream West Coast art world—Homer French's art offers, now, a uniquely insightful account of the marginal spaces of American modernity, and of humanity's ambiguous presence within them.

— Declan Long