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“Jessie Homer French at Various Small Fires: In death, she finds life”
by Christopher Knight

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Review Jessie Homer French at Various Small Fires: In death, she finds life

Simplified forms, flattened color, irregular perspective — stylistically, landscape paintings and genre scenes by Jessie Homer French might be termed naive. French, 77, has been working for more than 40 years but is untrained.

Yet, sophistication describes the nine earnest paintings in her enchanting debut exhibition at Various Small Fires. French paints what she knows — or wants to know — rather than recording what she sees. Mostly, this selection of modest easel paintings, made between 1988 and 2014, is a rumination on mortality.

Road Kill (Again) shows the quiet, softly brushed corpse of a white-tail deer lying in the weeds, tiny trickles of crimson blood running from its nose and a hind leg. From one canvas edge to the other, lacy patterns of green nature wrap the animal’s body in a delicate embrace. A life cut short by unexpected catastrophe is revered.

Two pictures show cemeteries, one in the lush bloom of spring and the other blanketed beneath a deep layer of snow. Both landscapes feature a wide strip of brown across the bottom — cutaways of the earth, where the bodies of men, women and children are laid out in caskets.

Neither cemetery scene is morbid. The juxtaposition of death with spring lushness italicizes the ordinariness of life cycles. The wintry scene features an ominous wolf, slightly oversize in scale, but the dead have nothing to fear. Menace lends a sense of indifferent security to the bodies below.

The artist doesn’t let herself off the hook either. In a dark woodland picture with a blazing campfire built from a pile of discarded paintings, even her own work faces extinction.



Jessie Homer French
Road Kill (again), 1998
Oil on canvas (Image courtesy of Various Small Fires, Los Angeles)

A scene of failure and loss, it is nonetheless also a picture of light and warmth.

French, who works in La Quinta, has not exhibited her paintings much. (A selection of her needlework quilts was at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts last year.) Happily, the gallery plans a larger show for the future.

*Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood.
Through May 27; closed Sundays and Mondays. (310) 426-8040, www.vsf.la*



Jessie Homer French
*Pender Island Cemetery, 2014, Oil
on canvas (Image courtesy of Various
Small Fires, Los Angeles)*