

Christopher Parrott at Fay Gold: Big Punch in a Small Space

In a series of primarily small works, contemporary realist **Christopher Parrott's** emotionally layered paintings depict twenty-something men and women in detached and enigmatic human landscapes. He pairs his subjects, as well as grouping them – as many as four or five - carefully arranged. They are standing, sitting, embracing, drinking, surveying and ignoring each other. Facial expressions are ambiguous. Bodies are sensual and strong. The women are nude or dressed in dark shifts, tops, and pants. The men lean, slouch, and gesture, wearing simple trousers and shirts, occasionally a suit and tie reminiscent of the 1960s. The effect is simultaneously stark, and nondescript.

Something in Parrott's choice of clothing, haircuts, and poses recalls Robert Longo's iconic figures, also depicted alone, in pairs, or small groups. But while Longo's treatment is brash, his subjects gyrating and contorting, Parrott sets his stage in understated fashion, heightening the subtlety of his images, and their possible meanings.

Only thirty-two years old, Christopher Parrott's work is surprisingly sophisticated. He seems to know precisely what he wants to do, and executes with remarkable control. In tiny formats (as small as 10" x 14"), his paintings pack an extraordinary punch, perhaps more so because of their diminutive size. He uses color, composition, and painterly skill to achieve strangely compelling scenes, working in a restrained but luminous palette - grey, black, khaki, olive, deep red, and a dusty, darkened rose. Largely painting in oil on canvas and paper, he also works in charcoal, on an even smaller scale.

Parrott's compositions frequently divide the picture plane into halves, thirds, fourths, and fifths, using rectangular doorways, walls, and paintings in the background to do so. This enhances the effect of solitude and separation among his characters, already suggested by faces that turn away, body language that is quietly conflicted, and stances that convey hesitation, menace, self-protection, and disaffection.

In *Siren Song*, a nude couple embraces on a bed, while an androgynous figure plays flute nearby. A fourth figure watches. In *The Fallen*, a woman sits with her back to a partially clothed man. The silence is palpable. It is unclear whether he is about to approach her, or holding himself back from doing so.

Although they cannot seem to connect on an emotional level, Parrott's subjects are blessed with the obvious assets of youth – bodies that are solid, tight, and pleasing; the apparent indifference to consequences of any sort. Perhaps this is part of why we, as viewers, are so drawn in. But what holds us is the artist's skill: the use of elegant, satiny surfaces to sharpen the effect of distance; the slight broadening of cheekbones and jaw lines, achieving both strength and homogeneity in his faces, vaguely reminiscent of Alex's Katz's portraits. Both rich and economical, Parrott's accomplished style seems a perfect fit for the uneasy coexistence of sensuality and isolation he portrays in his peers.



© Christopher Parrott Siren Song (2006)



© Christopher Parrott The Fallen (2006)

The tension created in these scenes is subtle and mysterious. There is no obvious danger, no clear cause for apathy or alienation. What *is* clear is the artist's sobering viewpoint on contemporary relationships. In *Execution Style*, a group of figures glance away from each other, and the viewer. Only one face, a young woman's, seems to look right at us. Her arms are behind her head; her face is blank. Is she pulling back her hair, or held at gunpoint, in a metaphorical firing squad?

In *Fix*, one of Parrott's recent charcoal drawings, two young women are captured in a private moment, about to go out for an evening. One fingers her hair; the other reaches into her dress to adjust a breast. These characters are oblivious to each other, or anyone looking on. The effect is both seductive and cold; the acts of fixing are impersonal, universal, and yet striking.

In this and Parrott's other works, relationships are fluid and temporal, on the brink of unspoken words and endings. Real contact is difficult, if not unattainable. We are reminded that youth is both beautiful and brooding. And contemporary culture further isolates and anesthetizes, even in the most intimate of settings.

Whatever you make of the narrative behind these works, it's worth paying close attention. The canvases are nuanced and luminous. The charcoals border on iconic. Christopher Parrott is talent preparing for big things. It is already impossible to look away.



© Christopher Parrott Execution Style (2006)