



Margaret Curtis, *Float of the Peephole* (detail), 1997, gouache and ink on rice paper, 15 1/2 x 13".

MARGARET CURTIS

ARENA

Margaret Curtis may be one of the most energetic young painters around. Although she first came to many viewers' notice in the 1994 "Bad Girls" show at the New Museum, her stock-in-trade has less to do with willful transgression than with sheer uncontainability. So it comes as no surprise that her works on paper are far from the casually rendered notational style that has become the lingua franca for so many artists today.

The earlier drawings in her recent exhibition, from 1992 to 1994, had not yet attained the boisterousness of those since

1995. Technically, the latter are rendered with such joyfully fanatical precision, unexpectedly married to an admirably improvisational looseness, that I'd imagine fellow practitioners would find them humbling: looking at them, you'd feel like either a slouch or a drudge by comparison.

Curtis is drawn to facetious yet pungent allegories that partake of a curious mix of the in-your-face obvious and the hermetically allusive. Among her most striking conceptions, here as in the 1996 painting exhibition "Kuntry Matters," is a series of what she calls "floats," essentially monster trucks that barrel through otherwise nebulous pictorial space on improbably large wide-tread tires, loaded down with all manner of symbolic regalia. The exact connections between, or meaning of, the heaping cargo of the floats is not always clear, and strong whiffs of satire get diffused amidst the ambiguities. Curtis' feminist purport, nevertheless—comically assured, yet psychologically edgy—is never in doubt in works entitled *Float of the Peephole* or *Slit Open Float*, both 1997.

I suspect that Curtis' ambiguities are the result of her particular take on allegory. The allegorical method itself, with its intersection of accumulation and ruin, appeals to her even more than the delirious burden of meaning it conveys. Her wayward artistic heritage reveals itself most nakedly in *Abandoned Female Form*, 1997, in which she declares her allegiance to Giorgio de Chirico—and not to his widely regarded early period, with its brooding architectural voids, so much as to the defiantly abject, endearingly ravaged pseudoclassical paintings of his dotage. In this drawing, a sort of semi-prone scarecrow, whose partly exposed armature pointedly resembles a wrecked painter's stretcher, supports a motley covering of *schmattes* and whatnot. (Is that bunched netted stuff lacework or chicken wire?) This voluptuous monstrosity reigns like a dainty giantess over a supine landscape.

Curtis pursues the theme of the image deteriorating to reveal an underlying structure in other recent drawings such as *Sign from Behind* and *Bluebird*, both 1997. These suggest an equal disdain for the realist's faith in appearances and the abstractionist's search for deeper reality. Each as ramshackle as the other, only their pathetic and droll confrontations supply sufficient entertainment for Curtis' merrily mordant eye.