

Lani Irwin and Alan Feltus

This summer the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art in Colorado will be presenting simultaneous solo exhibitions of paintings by Lani Irwin and Alan Feltus, American artists based in Assisi, Italy. The title of Irwin's show, "The Illusionist," could be a reference to the mimetic magic of the accomplished representational artist, but it also points to the specific iconography of her recent work. The carnival is her milieu here, with acrobats and fortunetellers shifted from the hurly-burly of the real-world sideshow to the rarefied fictive space of Irwin's paintings. In *Carnival III, Borrowed Space* (2004), the truncated figure of a woman—head, shoulders, hands—stares out at us from a game booth. Silhouetted birds, targets waiting to be knocked down, form the backdrop. On the counter, the Magician card from the Tarot arcana adds a frisson of mystery and reminds us of the ritual roots of games and theatrical performances. Irwin has always used female figures (sometimes doubled by church mannequins, puppets and other stand-ins) as principal characters in her private dramas. Over the years, these women have become stronger, with a lithe physicality that incarnates psychic power. The trapeze artist of *Sospesa* (2005) hangs suspended from the hands of her out-of-frame catcher. Bisecting the space, she is a conduit of energy between heaven and earth. The striped circus tent and swagged pennants of the background make for a study in geometry and color: taupe and slate-blue stripes, red, turquoise and golden-yellow triangles. *Zoetrope* (2006) presents a trio of circus performers, paradoxically as enigmatic and introspective as Norns. The central woman squats, legs apart, hands on her thighs, a poised athlete at rest. Props and gestural types migrate from painting to painting, collectively establishing a coherent symbolic system while allowing for formal variations. The squatting woman appears again in *Castor and Polydeuces* (2005), balanced like a tripod on her toes and a large ball. This time, she holds her arms tight against her body, and her hands are interlocked in some esoteric *mudra*. Behind her are twin spotted horses, colorful children's toys. The title alludes to the Dioscuri, twin sons of Zeus and Leda, and brothers of Helen and Clytemnestra, patrons (as Castor and Pollux) of the Roman order of knights—they were renowned horsemen—and, finally, enshrined as the heavenly twins of the constellation Gemini. The mythology provides a context, but Irwin avoids the usual trappings of classical style for an original visual essay on the dynamics of balance. The same toy horse appears in *La Farfalla* (2005), along with flowers, the Sun Tarot card and the large-scale, dramatic butterfly wall decoration that gives the picture its Italian title. In this richly patterned painting, the horse's spots rhyme with the eyes on the butterfly's wings, and the bent elbows of the central figure echo the chevrons of the backdrop. The colors are striking, with the pale skin and red hair of the woman set off against a symphony of greens that range from light sage to forest.

As might be expected from artists who have made their home in Assisi for decades, Irwin and Feltus are both enamoured of Renaissance art, although their works are not historical pastiches. Both like to look at books of reproductions, a practice that adds a layer of aesthetic distance. Irwin keeps a Rogier Van der Weyden book next to her while she paints, and it's easy to see the influence of the Flemish master's shallow stage-set spaces and eerie calm on her work. Feltus uses mirrors to isolate parts of a face or a body. He approaches the canvas as a rectangle, an arena for investigating relationships, between figures and between figure and ground. Rather than using models, he paints both male and female figures from his own mirrored image. Yet, despite the way he treasures the solitude of the studio, Feltus frequently seems to be considering the dialogue—or at least the Pinteresque silences—between men and women. In *Olaf and Anya* (2006) a man slumps over a table, resting his arms and head on a newspaper. A woman sits on the floor at his feet, knee bent up protectively against her body. The geometric puzzle of floor tiles, newspaper sheets and the nearly abstract wall behind them gives the composition an austere formal gravity, but the implicit emotion of the scene adds a subtle charge. The title of Feltus's Boulder show, "Inscrutable Intent," underlines the enigmatic psychology at play. His colors tend toward the monochromatic, and his simple props—rudimentary tables and chairs, sheets of paper—have an anonymity both existential and Platonic. With her vibrant colors and theater trunk of costumes and toys, Irwin presents something closer to an allegorical pageant. Building in different ways on the formal and iconographic legacy of the past, these two artists continue to explore permutations of the figure in space and the complexities of the individual soul. Even in multigure compositions—Feltus's uneasy doppelgänger couples, Irwin's triune priestesses—they are charting out intensely private worlds. The exhibitions are on view June 1–September 1, 2007, at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, 1750 Thirteenth Street, Boulder, Colorado 80302. Telephone (303) 443-2122. On the Web at www.bmoca.org