

Marshall Crossman at Dolby Chadwick Gallery

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Marshall Crossman's show of recent work at Dolby Chadwick Gallery explores with one exception a single theme - the class picture. Taking as her starting point those painful formal portraits made for high school or college yearbooks, compiled as page after page of alphabetized grids, Crossman obsessively examines what these images really offer us. Through the act of appropriation, she reinvents the class picture and transforms it into a kind of anti-portrait that conceals more than it reveals while also hinting at how very little can be known through such a record. Crossman seems at first most interested in the dehumanizing effects of such archiving. Her gridded figures, sometimes outlined in black, vary little in the silhouettes they cast. The endless repetitions and duplications of these bust-length portraits across the canvases create a sense of the pervasive monotony such classification most always engenders. Against the strict formality of this presentational mode, however, Crossman renders her figures in rich, expressive strokes. The manner of her painting, which owes a strong debt to such Bay Area Figurative painters as David Park, sets up an interesting counterpoint to the rigidity of the portrait's form. Foregoing the precise physical detailing which comprises traditional portraiture, Crossman conjures up a more evocative and enigmatic picture of the sitter. She understands that identity is elusive, perhaps even indescribable.

What Crossman captures in her portrait series is more intuitive, something one senses she feels about each sitter. The small portraits have a quick, sketch-like quality to them. They are full of movement and energy, as if Crossman was capturing a momentary impression. She marches through the unrelenting stream of faces, trying to read each one and set down its essence before moving quickly to the next. The fury of her pace is felt through all the work, and in the endless variations of subject matter one begins to get a sense of what Crossman feels about these people (though not of who they really are). Most are anonymous, empty silhouettes in black or gray or beige. Other frames are crossed through, "x" -ed out, the figure sometimes glimpsed behind this erasure, this denial. Perhaps Crossman does not like them? Or cannot read them? Or is it something more morbid? Are they a testament that not everyone survives this accounting, this archiving for the sake of posterity. Among these uncertainties, more distinct portraits appear. One face is defined by a brash gestural line partially encircling the head and forming a question mark. The face within bears no explicit features and is washed over with a flat beige, but color flecks of deep orange and yellows and reds pierce through the surface. This is an unreadable visage, but one which seems to contain a deep passion within. In the end, Crossman's faces seem to reflect themselves back upon the "painter, ultimately revealing more about her own artistic process than about any single sitter. In its subjective reflection, Crossman's work deconstructs the notion of portraiture by questioning the promise of any knowledge or meaning that might be found in one's likeness.