



PATRICK AHERNE

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Quiet Art That Tells The Truth / Absence of contrivance marks
Patrick Aherne retrospective

Kenneth Baker

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If recognition kept pace with accomplishment, Patrick Aherne would be one of Northern California's most celebrated painters. His long teaching career at the University of California at Santa Cruz was punctuated by few solo exhibitions there or elsewhere.

Yet the work in Aherne's small retrospective at the College of Notre Dame's Wiegand Gallery is immediately impressive.

Its subdued palette and shallow picture space cause some of Aherne's work to snuggle like camouflage against the Wiegand's field stone walls and spotty lighting.

But a closer look at pictures such as "Grove" (1982-87), "Paysage" (1969-81) and "Treed River" (1981-95) reveals worlds of deft, restless drawing and quiet chromatic dissonance.

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Aherne's work seems to give off historical echoes without contrivance.

Few painters could try -- without embarrassing themselves or us -- to cut a middle path between Courbet and Cezanne, as Aherne does in the landscape "Above Elkhorn" (1994). With its willowy drawing and shallow, draperylike space, "Treed River" exhales memories of Matisse, Pollock and perhaps even William Blake.

"Marshy Dig" (1975) recalls Joan Mitchell, "Ikebana" (1974-79) the early Philip Guston, "Bush Painting" (1975-76) the slivered abstractions of Lee Krasner. But Aherne's color sense is always his own.

"Treed River," an 8-by-12-foot diptych, is especially impressive. Its accretion of small gestures and stuttering revisions leave it -- looking resolved yet uncomposed.

Some visitors to Aherne's show will be surprised to find themselves reminded of Gerhard Richter, whose international acclaim may be out of proportion to what anyone can achieve in painting. Like Richter, Aherne shuttles between imagery and abstraction, or more and less abstract work. But while Richter equates sophistication with irony and teases us with authorial detachment, Aherne paints straight ahead, as if art objects owed no apology for their anachronism or their implicit bid to become valuable property.

Theorists of contemporary art will take Aherne's directness as a mark of provinciality, of unresponsiveness to the central realities and ideas of our moment. His work is not confrontational, but it is good enough to make us ask

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ourselves whether we are on the side of theory, or of what artworks themselves offer us.

PAINTING AND THEN SOME

PATRICK AHERNE: NATURE ENVISIONED: Paintings. Through February 28 at Wiegand Gallery, College of Notre Dame, 1500 Ralston Ave., Belmont. Hours noon to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. (650) 508-3595.