

NEW ART examiner

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ILLINOIS

Grace V. Cole

Illinois Central Gallery
East Peoria, 309/694-5300

This exhibition by Chicago-area artist Grace V. Cole was top-drawer, but it seemed only a sampling. There were eight oils, two pastels, and seven drawings, a total of 17 works subdivided by two categories, still life and the figure.

Cole commands our interest because of her obvious skill with the medium. Her brush strokes are clean-cut and limpid; they are in the service of a keen and deft eye. The drawing is firm and sure. Altogether, the show is an affirmation of what used to be known as traditional skills.

The still life oils are placid and handsome. Metal reflective objects like globes and pyramids sit on or near window sills. Through the windows cloud-mottled blue skies glow, while around them draperies fall or billow. The term "classic" used in the titles must be the key to the artist's intentions, although the works speak ably themselves.

It is the figure works that most compel the eye, as nudes tend to do. The several drawings are not just observations but are also a short catalogue of stylistic approaches, ranging from an "ink-splash" style to a prismatic-lens rendition to another dedicated to Bellmer. The pastels evoke Degas, since that master's use of the medium still defines excellence.

The show's climax was two three-quarter figures, one male and one female. Smaller than life-size, they nonetheless are strong and monumental; hung separately and obviously not intended as a pair, they are both consistently forceful. Here Western history and contemporary talents merge. Cole's nudes are firm, sleek, and luminescent forms that emerge from a shower of warm umbers and siennas.

Works such as these are in good part based on "permission to look." The viewer, guided by the artist, is invited to savor, to celebrate. Certainly, the lustful will lust, the puritanical will burn; each will see what he is predisposed to see. With this artist one is led to see the mystery of beauty, the beauty of mystery.

Price range: \$150 to \$2,500.

Karl Moehl