

The American Dream, Twisted: A Review of Gabrielle Garland at Corbett Vs. Dempsey

By Chris Miller | 23 March 2020

If you're not thrilled by the paintings in this show, you probably don't like the modern tradition of oil painting. All ten pieces, each measuring twenty-two by twenty-nine inches, depict the facade of a different one-story house. It's a residential architecture especially popular in America because it offers apparent independence and self-sufficiency at an affordable price. That's an illusion, since these humble buildings, often generic if not identical, are firmly tied into an urban grid and mostly owned by a bank—but fantasies are important to the popular mind. The artist has made these tacky structures even more fantastic by bending lines, twisting planes and ratcheting up chroma every which way. Presumably the residents are crackpots, just like their homes, and as this millennial artist celebrates their cartoonish wackiness, she carries Chicago Imagism into its seventh triumphant decade.



Untitled, 2017, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 22 x 29 inches

There's hardly any adolescent sarcasm, belligerence or provocation. The virtuosity is closer to Kandinsky than to comic books. The imagist subject matter appears to be just an excuse for exuberant painting, much as traditional landscape and still life were for some post-impressionists. In that way, she seems closer to an earlier generation of Chicago painters like Francis Chapin (1899-1965) and William S. Schwartz (1896-1977) than to the Hairy Who. Garland is such a fluid manipulator of colorful space. I can't really see trees, clouds, doors or roofs. I just see calligraphic brush strokes, playful colors and intense formal arrangements. Some completely abstract compositions of hers can be found online, as well as depictions of more upscale modernist interiors. Her formal imagination, however, seems most prolific when tethered to a humorous, blue-collar, representational subject.

Now living and working in New York, perhaps she will eventually move beyond the world of Chicago art she experienced while studying here more than ten years ago at the School of the Art Institute and the University of Chicago. Perhaps she'll even take up the challenge of representing our world in a more serious way. But even if she never does, she's awfully good at what she's doing right now.