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EDGAR BRYAN

Zach Feuer

530 West 24th Street, Chelsea

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Edgar Bryan's first New York solo show is so low-key that it must be trying to prove something. Deft subtlety disguised as wry, inept wistfulness has always been Mr. Bryan's strength. Here he aims it at painting as a bravura activity; New York debuts as aggressive declarations; and oil paint as female flesh. Anyway, he's using acrylic.

Perhaps to come across as the anti-Currin or the un-Balthus, Mr. Bryan concentrates on two of painting's oldest subjects, the female nude and the still life, the latter using only vases and jugs. Both kinds of "vessels" seem made up, or borrowed from comic books, along with the alternately pale and saturated off-key palette.

Essential to the look: using as little paint as possible. Therein lies the bravura. Colors, when present, are mostly stained. The characteristically scrawny, awkwardly posed young woman in "The Sword" is not only nude; she's also nearly paint-free. She both shoulders a large water jug (as in Corot) and holds a sword (as in Poussin). But the jug's narrow neck, black-to-red glaze and teal highlight is more 1950s Los Angeles than French Academy in Rome.

The conversation among painted, unpainted and glazed is constant. Objects tend to dominate, in both the titles and on the ground. In "The Black Vase" they hem in an akimbo nude who seems to be trying to touch the top and bottom edges as if to meet compositional obligations.

In the end you may find yourself watching Mr. Bryan's every move in these sweet, sharp meditations. A self-portrait shows the artist crouching at a toy easel, working on a small, relatively thick-surfaced abstraction. The work personifies his central oxymoron: sincere irony.