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ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Review: Emma Webster's landscapes take you into a sublime, magical world

By David Pagel

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Emma Webster's paintings are grand affairs: sweeping landscapes filled with forests and mountains and rivers and lakes, some bathed in golden light and others shrouded in shadows so deep you shudder. Albert Bierstadt's majestic pictures of the American West come to mind, as do the sublime vistas painted by the Hudson River School.

Webster's oils on canvas are also modest: informal still lifes filled with toy-size creatures (often bunnies and butterflies, but also flamingos and penguins and carousel horses) that she has made out of unfired lumps of clay and placed in tabletop dioramas. Some of her setups come with 2D trees (paper doll style). All include pint-size theatrical backdrops (collaged from watercolors and photographs). And all are lighted by flashlights or candles or a bare bulb.

Childhood playtime comes to mind, as do grade-school craft projects, cuddly stuffed animals, model railroad layouts and books filled with wonderfully illustrated folk tales.

Conceptually, Bierstadt and playtime have very little in common. To travel, in the mind's eye, from his spectacularly theatrical 19th century masterpieces to what precocious kids can do with cardboard and Play-Doh is to cover a great distance — and then some. But Webster's paintings make you feel as if you could reach out and touch both at once.

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Her skills with a paintbrush make that magic happen. Each of the 15 variously sized paintings in "Arcadia," the L.A. artist's hometown solo debut at Diane Rosenstein Gallery, is, above all else, a pleasure to behold.

The paint is juicy. It's been applied generously. Some passages look as if they're still wet. Nothing has been fussed over. Freshness is everywhere. Not a trace of micromanaging can be detected.

The brushstrokes are bold, applied swiftly and without second thoughts. Yet they're also wickedly efficient in their capacity to depict the textures and weightiness of 3D objects, not to mention light and shadow, liquids and gasses.

And the colors are luscious, richly blended primaries and secondaries and tertiaries that are saturated and sensual and accentuated with blinding highlights. Think Paul Gauguin by way of John Singer Sargent with a little Lucian Freud tossed in.

Compositionally, Webster's pictures are especially sophisticated. Sometimes she structures her paintings so you feel as if you're in the thick of things: face-to-face with a mythical bull or deep in the weeds of an Edenic garden, where all sorts of creatures crawl. At other times, she telescopes space, packing great distances — and everything in them — onto the picture plane, without making it feel cramped.

In Webster's hands, the picture plane is never a single thing, a unified whole, a closed totality or a place where only one story unfolds. It's a malleable, multidimensional world where memories and fantasies intermingle and time and space expand and contract. There's plenty of room for whimsical dioramas and sublime landscapes — and for viewers who like painting to take them to places they can't get to any other way.

Diane Rosenstein Gallery, 831 N. Highland Ave., L.A. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through March 23. (323) 462-2790, dianeroseinstein.com

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