RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ARTSEEN **FEBRUARY 3RD, 2011**

ELLEN LANYON

by Martica Sawin

PAVEL ZOUBOK GALLERY | NOVEMBER 19 – DECEMBER 18, 2010

Ellen Lanyon, "Majolica Tea" (2010). Acrylic on canvas . 36 × 36 inches. Courtesy Pavel Zoubok Gallery.

A glass-sided skeleton cabinet from Cooper Union, obsolete for art school purposes, was retired to Ellen Lanyon's SoHo studio where, minus the skeleton, it became a repository for eccentric objects collected by the artist. The rest of her collection fills most available surfaces—walls, shelves, table tops—in her wunderkammer loft. From there the objects migrate to paper and canvas. Concerned that they might be wiped out by some untold disaster, Lanyon created an "Index" by drawing each of some 300 items; the drawings were subsequently printed in limited edition sets of five volumes. Selected drawings were then cut from enlarged photocopies and pasted onto a backing; the resulting collages became the basis for the paintings in Lanyon's recent show at the Pavel Zoubok Gallery. Understanding this sequence helps to explain the illogical aspect of these works in which precisely delineated objects, inconsistent in scale, jostle each other in spaces that have neither the flatness of collage nor illusionistic three-dimensionality. The objects are precise and plausible but the realm they inhabit is the disjunctive one of dreams and random memory.

Through the course of many exhibitions, more in her native Chicago than in her adopted New York, where she moved in the 1970s, Lanyon has confounded viewers with her combination of straightforward, uninflected rendering, bizarre juxtapositions of obsolete mechanical devices, whimsical majolica humidors, Mexican stuffed frogs, and bits of flora and fauna. The collection was not assembled according to a preconceived program; when she finds an eccentric object that speaks to her, some deep-felt affinity prompts her to acquire and ultimately paint it. And there are the things she can't physically own but collects in memory, such as the Korean screens exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum that inspired the patterned surfaces in "Everything Asian" or prehistoric dolmens, recalled from her travels, that loom alongside sewing boxes, protractors, and toy pistols. Old engravings, especially those by the 19th century French engraver Louis Poyet, have also been mined for arcane images. All this finds its way onto canvas via a stream-of-consciousness, following what the artist calls "the eccentric ribbons of the subconscious." A disguised formalist underpinning holds together what might otherwise be a chaotic jumble of oddities; shapes that rhyme, subtle color relationships, and glimpses of a variegated underpainting provide unity across the canvas.

Lanyon's capacity for fastidious replication of intricate objects originated with a job she had at 15 in the drafting department of a foundry, where she had to produce precise drawings of mechanical parts for use in assembly diagrams. Studying at the Chicago Art Institute and the M.F.A. program at the University of Iowa, she swam against the rising tide of Abstract Expressionism, preferring to work in egg tempera on small gesso panels inspired by the 1940s work of Philip Guston. Back in Chicago, she turned to painting nostalgic figures based on old photographs and shared an interest in metaphysical imagery with a group that included Robert Barnes, June Leaf, James McGarrell, and Irving Petlin. Liberation from the figure came around 1970, when she discovered the book Thayer's Quality Magic and met her neighbor, Mr. Miller, a magician and manufacturer of magicians' props. Gradually, she discovered that she could be, in her words, "a magician who can transform flowers into fire, create the animate out of the inanimate, and utilize osmosis and gravity to create an illusion."

The role of prestidigitator took on a greater sense of purpose during a National Parks Residency in the Florida Everglades, when Lanyon became aware of the environmental degradation that threatened the surrounding natural ecosystems. In serial format on large folding screens and in small accordion books, she painted fragments from nature metamorphosing into inanimate objects. The magical process of transformation became a metaphor for what was happening on the planet, as natural evolution and industrial development continued on their collision course. This remains the subtext of the recent paintings, implicit in the cacophony of competing voices that seem to emanate from the mute images.

Like a skilled magician, Lanyon conjures her images using a paintbrush as a magic wand, operating it with deftness and a delicacy of touch that gives translucency to the most solid objects. A humorous, even ludicrous aspect to her creations mingles with an ominous undertone, for example in "Majolica Tea," in which a vintage Portuguese pitcher in the form of a monkey sits astride a coiled snake spewing venom that turns into blossoms as it reaches the teacups. More sinister is "Crimping and Pinking," in which a ribbon of fabric is caught in the grasp of a crimping machine while threatened by the pinking shears' open jaws, as innocuous domestic objects turn lethal. The longer one looks at these escapees from the wunderkammer, the more complex the implications of their confrontations become.