

ELENA SISTO
DAMON BRANDT
GALLERY

Elena Sisto's new paintings combine the media imagery of Pop art with a luscious, painterly expressiveness. On small canvases, each a foot or so square, Sisto bunches various image fragments culled from sources ranging from comic strips to trompe l'oeil drawings, against swirling white or pastel backgrounds.

One of Sisto's favorite sources is the late Ernie Bushmiller's classic comic strip "Nancy." In Sisto's hands the frizzy-haired heroine becomes a kind of surrogate self, in essentially surrealist narratives. In *Stinker*, 1989, for example, Nancy pulls back a theater curtain above a pair of staring eyes that frame a penis for a nose; in *Hearth*, 1989, she's carried down a ladder by a fireman. There's a curiously distanced feeling to these images, a sense that the events they depict are recalled like war stories. Alongside the rescued Nancy are several drawings of ladders, as if Sisto were trying to remember exactly which one the fireman had climbed up.

Sisto depicts these cartoon figures with a quick, almost cursory line and bright colors—pinks, yellows, aquas—that teeter on the edge of garishness. With their icing-thick backgrounds, these are sensuous paintings, demanding attention as objects, as narratives and as quotations.

These compendia of popular images suggest David Salle's combines, but they're more pointed, less about random chunks in



Elena Sisto, *Untitled*, 1989, oil on canvas, 18 x 18"

the media soup than about the personal resonance of archetypal stories. An essential aspect of American Pop art was its machine-made veneer, the slick productlike quality it shared with advertising and the media. Sisto's voluptuous images, however, seem more closely related to Sigmar Polke's European Pop, which combined commercial imagery with the use of expressive line and color, holdovers from painterly painting that on this side of the Atlantic had to be rejected as overly dominating.

Sisto's expressive use of paint allows the instant nostalgia that characterizes Pop to come to the fore. There's a sense of pensive melancholy to these image complexes recalling fragments of Roman painting, or even closer to home, the intimate lyricism of Joan Nelson.

At the same time, Sisto's images can tilt toward the charged anger of Surrealism. In *Untitled*, 1989, for example, the gem of the show, an orange and rose backlit Nancy, eyes reduced to empty brackets, grins toothily; floating alongside her head is a disembodied upside-down mouth that echoes her own. One smile expresses chagrin, the other malicious fury. In this painting Sisto uses the methods of painterly expression to crack the bland surface of popular imagery, releasing the emotions it masks and parodies.

—Charles Hagen