

REVIEWS

Sharon Ellis



CALIFORNIA

27 May - 1 June

CHRISTOPHER GRIMES GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

SHARON ELLIS

All of Sharon Ellis's visionary paintings are Californian in ways far beyond the obvious fact that they've been made in Los Angeles. (Very slowly, by the way: she averages four a year.) In the painstakingly produced calmness of their extreme pictorial abundance they mirror and even distort the essential conundrums of their surroundings: an environment made up of long stretches of delirious beauty intensified by the perpetual threat of disaster. Her paintings, of course, are not themselves likely to self-destruct, but they are powerful, even dangerous, nonetheless.

It is provocative to consider why these six paintings are the first ones to be specifically classified as representing California. Ellis usually conceives of her work in specific groups or cycles: in the past she has mined such allegorically rich territory as the four seasons, the four elements, and the times of the day. Unlike some of her earlier series, these paintings are more distinct from each other. Three of the paintings do share a traditional 'landscape' format: *Sundown* (2005), *New Moon and Palm Trees* (2004), and *Eucalyptus and Poppies* (2003). The references to local flora are, of course, made clear by their titles, but, more importantly, each of these paintings takes what in lesser hands would be cliché and transforms it into something almost radioactive: the fiery red-orange clouds of *Sundown*, in particular, rage over a darkened field from which nine white-hot morning

glories almost literally pop in your face. Painted in a scrupulous manner, these three canvases extend the reach of Ellis's point of view into more specific territory that makes me very curious about where she is headed next.

The remaining three paintings are oriented as 'portraits', and one in particular easily qualifies as the strangest painting in the show. At first glance, I thought that the sprite-like figure hovering in the centre of the predominantly electric blue-green *Kelp Forest* (2006) was a self-portrait. (I still think it might be.) Whoever she is, her presence deepens the mysteries of the exhibition, especially in relation to *Lotus for Agnes* (2006), in which a single glowing (and somehow translucent) flower is offered up to several swaying strands of tiny stars. Without these two paintings, I would likely have had a significantly different reaction to the show - for me their narrative implications stir things up.

Finally, the simply named *Sunshine* (2005) remains my favourite. Wildly active, it is grounded by a silhouetted lime-green/wheatgrass symmetrical forest, above which a seemingly Islamic-inspired medallion hovers like the sun. Radiating to the point of almost obliterating the blue sky, it also seems to have triggered a highly organized spiralling of bird-like leaves. It is inexplicable in the absolutely best way. *Terry R Myers*

This page: Sharon Ellis, *Sundown*, 2005, alkyd on canvas, 86 x 117 cm

Facing page: *Sunshine*, 2005, alkyd on canvas, 107 x 86 cm. Courtesy Christopher Grimes Gallery, Los Angeles

