

From the exhibition, *Contemporaries VI: Mary Kay*, 1992

By Leland Warren

Nature morte, the term used in France since the eighteenth century for what in English we call still lifes, would initially seem an especially apt description of the recent paintings of Mary Kay. Dead butterflies, locusts, beetles, flies, and larvae painted in lavish colors and shown piled or sprawled across huge canvases suggest themes of fecundity and procreancy that have variously informed the tradition of still life painting in the West. If here flashes of color emerging from dark spaces recall the similarly dynamic appearance of magnificent flowers in seventeenth-century Dutch pictures, of gaudy-blooms that celebrate human participation in, even mastery of, nature's power, Kay's actual subjects are monstrously enlarged versions of creatures we can often find on the margins of the same early paintings, creatures placed there to remind viewers of the ubiquity and inevitability of decay and death.

But if these ostensible subjects would seem to place the works within one of the traditionally lower kinds among the hierarchy of genres, the actual appearance of the paintings - their scale, their drawing, their surfaces point toward a radically different placement, among past and modern heroic modes. Far from the still lifes' astonishing fidelity to floral and entomological detail with their careful, artist-effacing application of paint, the bold, gestural strokes here produce explosions, swirls, fountains of color whose energetic and seemingly uncontrollable assertiveness suggests the enterprise of abstract expressionism. But because within this dense texture of forces we make out distinct figures disposed in exaggerated postures and potentially significant relationships to one another, because, in other words, we perceive an implied narrative beyond that of the painter's effort in creating an image, we may reasonably think of these as history paintings.

Titles of the works ironically invoke the conflicting conventions of these distinct modes of painting. *Small Insect Pile* designates an appropriately inanimate (if unusual) object for a still life, while *Insect Pile 3* suggests that the collection has served only as the occasion for a series of paintings whose purpose is to allow the artist to practice and/or display her skills. But an initial feeling that the choice to treat this subject on this scale can hardly be innocent is justified by other titles, titles like *The Plague* and *The Quick and the Dead* whose Biblical allusions imply that we are to read in the images the kind of allegorical stories appropriate to the most significant of narrative paintings.

If the locusts recall one of the Egyptian plagues, why are they given such striking colors and why do the legs and trunk of one of them look so like a fallen human? What are we to make of an apparent identification of insects as those who are to be judged by Christ at the end of time? And although the rendering of the butterfly in *The Glorious Dead* is, indeed glorious, we recognize the title as a commonplace - indeed, formulaic - reference to valor and sacrifice, to the glory conventionally associated with those who have given their lives for a cause publically defined as both noble and sacred.

*The Plague*, *The Glorious Dead*, and perhaps *Cacophony*: such labels encourage us to read Kay's works in relation to a more specific tradition of public painting about war, a tradition probably best known for its idealizations of the virtues of combatants, but one which also includes masterpieces of visual invective, works pointing up the cynicism that is often behind the rhetoric of those who urge others to sacrifice for the nation. By deploying (usually dead) insects in contexts where we would expect to find sacrificing (or sacrificed) humans, Kay would seem clearly to take a place in the skeptical camp. Indeed, to me the most powerful of the paintings, the inexpressively titled *Insect Pile 3*, achieves much of its force by recalling in its pyramidal structure of ambiguously aspiring creatures Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1817), a work not about war, but nevertheless among the most heroic assaults on political cynicism ever painted.

But to cite a possible progenitor (even if it is only for this single viewer that Gericault plays the part) is to recognize Kay as a contemporary painter whose relationship with the conventions by which earlier art conveyed meaning is necessarily problematic. The iconographical or allegorical systems that in earlier times served as a basis for communication between artist and public are largely forgotten, recoverable to some extent by scholarship but of diminishing use even to Gericault and for the contemporary painter all but useless. And the reasons for this absence weigh more heavily than the loss itself, for it no longer seems clear that there are commonly held truths to be expressed or, if there are, that traditional ways of art making are capable of addressing such matters.

We see in the dense, conflicted surfaces of these canvases an individual painter's struggle with such doubts, a personal agony that reflects much of the history of twentieth-century art. The bravura painting, the record of efforts that went into the disposition of colors on a surface, demonstrates not merely Kay's talent but her situation as a post-expressionist painter fully aware of arguments that a painting need not (perhaps cannot) have any subject other than the painting itself. But Kay works to confront us with a variety of subjects. Her paintings are about the beauty of colors and shapes, and about the loveliness of the natural world from which these are taken. They are about the intensity of pleasure that derives from placing beauty and death in close proximity. And, yes, they are about hypocrisy and cynicism, not only of the politicians who use hollow phrases or idealized images but of the artists who make them.

We may be inclined to view these works as examples of expressive painting or to read them as powerful, if ambiguous, social statements. But they seem, finally, to insist that to choose either alternative is to admit that painting has lost its distinctive power to unite thought and image, to move the mind through beauty; and they also demonstrate that no such admission is yet necessary.