



Pieces of the whole

Deconstructing Tina Ingraham's work at Greenhut Galleries

BY CHRIS THOMPSON

---

"Space is the fragment in which the unseizable whole of life, material and moral, is transubstantiated or seized in the art of painting. Because space is the most material concrete element of our visual consciousness."

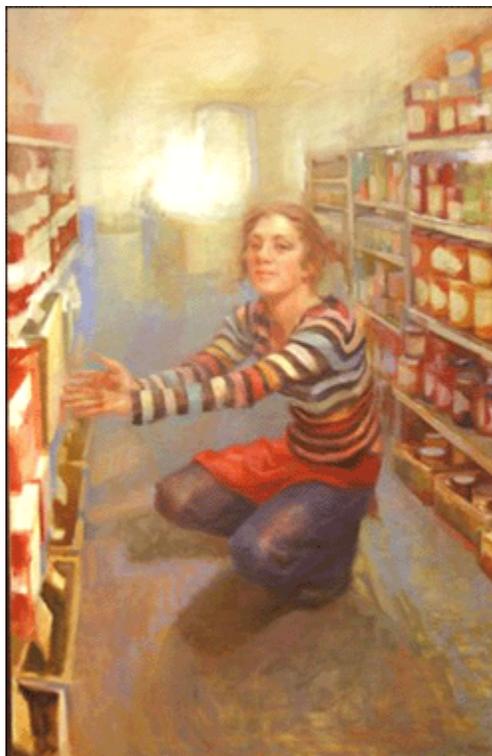
Those lines, from the late art historian Léo Bronstein's book *Fragments of Life, Metaphysics and Art*, are at once the clearest and densest summation of what painting does when it works: it seizes an unseizable experience, and presents its form in an encounter both aesthetic and ethical.

This is the place in painting that is explored by Tina Ingraham in her paintings now on display at Greenhut Galleries. Her work shows a virtuosity that isn't satisfied with being proudly on display but unfolds as evidence of having pushed further into territories that, at each point in the evolution of the painting, were not yet possible but soon would be.

"I mean the material space we see, not any abstract 'meaningful' derivative space; I mean simply the banal yet astonishing phenomenon of extension, of distance, of three-dimensional visibility," wrote Bronstein.

Painting is wondrously able to invent spaces more real than any in the world. Ingraham's portrait of her daughter (not on display but shown upon request) depicts a young woman bent over a cup of coffee at the far end of a table. Backlit, her sturdy shoulders and straight long hair recall an Egyptian funerary statue, ready to house the spirit of its subject after death.

Ingraham catches our gaze at the foreground, locking us into the first of a set of ellipses that leads into the painting's depths. We move from the large bowl full of apples, barely visible in the mid-day darkness, to the luminous rim of the woman's coffee-cup, which her hands fold around and lock into place. Here, the curves traced by her arms meet in a bowed ring at the stable line of her shoulders, which seem able to bear any amount of weight. At this line, the entire architecture of the image snaps into focus: a set of interlocking voids, each one integral to the whole. To be able to make the empty cohere as form: this is the secret of painterly space.



---

Tina Ingraham, *The Grocer*, oil on linen, 32 inches x 20 inches, 2005.

"The individual space structure with which, like the snail within its shell, an artist surrounds himself is his whole unbroken reality and truth, his triple level: lyrical — the hidden truth of his inspiration or his personality; epic — the hidden impact of his precise historical momentum; cosmic — his calculable and incalculable breaking through the stellar flow. Space in art is a choice, therefore a judgment," wrote Bronstein.

*The Grocer* hangs in the gallery window. Its subject is ostensibly straightforward — a young shop-clerk meeting our gaze as she sits on her haunches and fishes something off the shelf. But the image is a study in the workings of grace no less divine for being staged in the aisles of an Old Port grocery store.

The painting is a spatial contradiction — its drawing collapses the space in upon itself, claustrophobic and shifting, and yet the operations of color are utterly expansive, both grounding the young woman in place and intensity, and pulling outward from her. Behind her, where a spectral customer approaches the counter, Ingraham has carved all the paint off the canvas, creating an excess of light that soaks itself back into the thin washes of color nearby.

The woman's hands, opened to handle an item, seem at the same time poised in benediction. Her look is impossible to read; all the usual signs — soft moist eyes, serene smile — point toward a figure kind and wise beyond her years, and yet there's something more troubling there too, hovering between love and loathing.

"That is why I say *space in art is a moral space*," wrote Bronstein.

*Tina Ingraham's work is featured in "The 11th Annual Holiday Show" at Greenhut Galleries, which runs through January 2 with an artists' reception December 10, 1-4pm, 146 Middle Street; for more, call 772-2693.*

Chris Thompson can be reached at [xxtopher@hotmail.com](mailto:xxtopher@hotmail.com)

**Issue Date: December 9 - 15, 2005**

**Back to the Art [table of contents](#)**