

## Galleries

# Realist Marvels At Osuna

By Michael Welzenbach  
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She's been one of our finest realist oil painters for years, but Manon Cleary's forte has always been her nearly photographic graphite works on paper. By "photographic," I don't mean to imply that the images have the appearance of photographs, so much as that the surface of the drawings and their meticulous detail leave one to search in vain for the impress of a drawn line, the careless smudge. Light seems to well through the paper behind her figures.

At the Osuna Gallery, Cleary's works join those of fellow realists Polly Kraft and Hugh Steers, as well as a lovely abstract work on paper by Elaine Kurtz—a no less diligent and meticulous imagemaker. She can make one thin vertical line dividing two gray planes every bit as exciting as one of Cleary's half-shadowed, curvaceous nudes.

On the one hand, this might be viewed as something of a throwaway show—something to fill out before the next, more extravagant exhibition. It's small and intimate, and draws mostly on local talent. But in another sense, and perhaps despite design, this is one of those rare exhibits in which all the participants manage to make one another shine. Take the nine small watercolors by perennial still life painter Kraft. Both in Washington and New York, most gallery-goers are by now familiar with this artist's deftly washed arrangements of fruits and vegetables—especially onions. There has probably never been a painter so fond of onions, nor so good at portraying them.

But in this show we are treated to a couple of Kraft images I dare say no one would have expected of her: a pair of studies of smoked fish. These Graham Sutherland-like

sketches are among the best she's ever done. They're stark, briskly limned and a bit grisly in aspect, quite unlike her other still lifes. Written skeletons with shreds of flesh attached to them, they are dead things rather than viands suitable for a Flemish painter's table. Intricate, dry sculptures rather than succulent, globular fruit.

Hugh Steers, whose last show at the gallery, while technically impressive, was characterized by blatant homoeroticism tinged with the sadistic, has changed his tune much for the better. He has achieved subtlety. With this series of small oil-on-paper sketches, Steers shows himself to be not only a fine realist with an extraordinary sense of light, shadow and mood, but an artist capable of telling a narrative story on a visual stage, much in the manner of Edvard Munch.

Of Steers's wall full of contributions, the thoughtful little painting "Orange Lighter," a man in his sickbed reaching toward an American flag draped from his bedside table, is easily the most striking. The draped flag leads the eye to a bedpan on the floor. The supine figure is illuminated by a funnel of yellow light emanating from the ceiling, in the fashion of the heavenly limelight of so many Renaissance religious paintings. Everything about the picture is sordid and nostalgic, yet ineffably mystical, and as delicate as one of Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal."