

'Bonsai' Show at Maccarone Honors Roger Brown

Roberta Smith

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This exquisitely calibrated group show honors Roger Brown, the Chicago painter whose “Virtual Still Life” series is on view in the gallery’s larger space (at 630 Greenwich Street).

Never seen in New York before, that series features Mr. Brown carefully matching some of his luminous cartoony landscapes with ceramic vessels — which he collected — on shelves attached to the paintings’ bottom edges. The paintings function partly as backgrounds reminiscent of patterned textiles, emphasizing Mr. Brown’s affinity for Americana, including quilts, as well as the love of craft central to his art.

The show centers on Mr. Brown’s painting “Bonsai #5, Literati (Bunjing),” which depicts an overgrown bonsai pine towering over a tiny couple, beneath a glowing, quiltlike bank of clouds. Around it, paintings and sculpture by five other artists form a shifting meditation on the relationship of art making and craft.

Mr. Brown’s careful textures find some common ground with the more mechanical, stucco-like surface of Peter Halley’s 1983 “Power Interruption” (which suggests the twin towers), and with “Third Red Sweater Painting,” a recent foray into painting by the sculptor Carol Bove. The catch: Its intricate, knitlike patterns

are stenciled, using a swath of chain mail specially fabricated for the task.

In “Behind the Green Door,” Alex Da Corte goes a step further, appropriating craft in the form of a beautiful store-bought Persian-style rug and pairing it with a handmade wood-and-paint lily near what appears to be a trapdoor to a hidden room.

The starburst surface of “Tubby,” one of Ken Price’s lobbed ceramic sculptures, comes closest to Mr. Brown’s tender sense of craft, as do two of Diane Simpson’s mysterious, meticulously constructed sculptures, which somehow suggest architecture, cartoons and devotional garments. This barely begins to mine the crosscurrents to be experienced here.

—Roberta Smith

Maccarone
98 Morton Street, at Washington Street
West Village
Through Aug. 7

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Top left: Roger Brown’s 1997 oil *Bonsai #5, Literati (Bunjing)* is the centerpiece of a show at the Maccarone gallery. Courtesy of the Estate of Roger Brown and School of the Art Institute of Chicago. *Bottom right:* Ken Price’s *Tubby* (2011) is part of a group exhibition that honors the work of the Chicago artist Roger Brown. Courtesy of the Estate of Ken Price.