

Ridley Howard
born 1973 Atlanta
studied University of Georgia School of Museum of Fine Arts Boston
studied with Kurt Kauper David Humphrey Amy Sillman
lives and works in Brooklyn New York
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*Brass buttons, green silks
and silver shoes
Warm evenings, pale mornings,
bottle of blues
And the tiny golden pins that
she wore up in her hair ...*

Gram Parsons, *Brass Buttons*, 1969

Ridley Howard's paintings are often described as being at once epic, banal, and sweet. They casually allude to a masculine melodrama or male sentimentality and longing. Drawing from film, music, posters, illustrations, and the American scene-painting tradition, Howard's delicate paintings pose as lovely, romantic stills.

In Howard's most recent work, the architectural details allude to the density and clamour which colour New York. A sweeping view across a broad river seems to suggest grandiosity and aspiration in its scale, its vastness; but it is also the view across the East River toward an enormous low-rent housing estate (perhaps a sly wink to the truly grand Hudson River, which runs along the far side of Manhattan, and its eponymously named school of American Romantic painters). In another painting a man and woman stare out past one another on the roof of a building, the closest most New Yorkers come to having a garden or private exterior space. Unusually for such a dense city, though, the skies in Howard's paintings are epic and limitless, bearing down on the figures, and are more like the skies you see over a suburban parking lot than from the light shafts and railroad apartments of a New York life. Unusually, too, the space of the paintings on the whole is quieted, and our attention is focused on the couple of figures who share a moment in each painting. The architecture present in the works never seems to contain the figures. Rather, the roadways, the airport tarmac or the river view suggest more a yearning beyond any confines as they extend outward beyond the painting's frame. This sense of space seems peculiarly American, always expanding, moving outward, uncontained by history or tradition. But as the frontiers push ever outward, the centre drains of life, of noise and colour. And it seems to be this sort of space through – or, better, against – which Howard's figures linger or pause. You never get the sense that these vast spaces fully contain the figures; nor do the figures seem fully to inhabit the space; instead, the space seems to be almost a back projection against which the figures move, walk, have a drink, or share a dance. They suggest, perhaps, an anxious but romantic dislocation rather than provide a sense of place for these men and women to interact. And as with a back projection or a film set, the details of the space are necessary only to help tell the story.

The feeling of dislocation and isolation is embedded in the way Howard has painted these works. Each is painted with meticulous attention. Each element considered and pieced together, the experience of the entire image never falls out of focus. The figures

themselves are treated with as much detail as their surroundings, which lends a sort of omniscient, remote, almost cinematic eye. As in a dream or, for that matter, a film, the narrative exists in the minute details as well as in the great gaps between them. Each detail in its sparkling clarity gives us clues to the whole story, but detail and specificity are held in check, and we are never told everything. Like a dream, too, the palette is often subdued and softened, bringing to mind the atmosphere and tonality of early Italian painters like Botticelli and Fra Angelico. Often overcast, a subtle and diffuse light blankets the figures in a sort of silence.

Inspired by the early films of the French New Wave, the figures themselves are dreamy, their interactions and movements restrained and refined. Delicate and chivalrous, the stories they hint at, perhaps autobiographical, are somewhere beneath or beyond the smooth surface of the painting. This is not without a subtle awkwardness or humour, somehow evoking the tragic grandeur of the films of Wes Anderson. Each figure is self-contained despite his or her proximity and apparent couplehood, and the melodrama bubbles beneath the surface quietly. Romance is sublimated, composure assured. The figures appear to be still actors, awaiting direction to move here or there, raise an arm, take a drink. The intricate detail with which they are rendered contrasts with the ambiguity and vagueness of their presence. Desire, then, is perpetually suspended, its object and subject never colliding carnally, messily.

The palpable sense of yearning lingers in the heavy air. The romance is in this suspension. As in the elliptical, twangy love songs of country musician Gram Parsons (whose portrait hangs in one of the paintings), melancholy and the endless deferment of pleasure are not only themselves enjoyable but are in fact the site of pleasure and of love. We understand that whether it is at the river's edge, or on the roof, or beside the pool, what keeps the couple apart is also what keeps them together, always.

Karolyn Hatton