

## Entertainment

Francesca Fuchs' *Blue Blanket*, left, and *Linen Closet* are on exhibit at the Zilkha Gallery in the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

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ART REVIEW

### Warming up to strange, gigantic babies

After the initial shock, appreciation sets in for Fuchs' *Perspectives 155*

By **DOUGLAS BRITT**  
For The Chronicle

Someone who caught Francesca Fuchs' show, *Perspectives 155*, before I did remarked, with a shudder, how disconcerting he found the babies in her monumental canvases. He added that he'd only had time to do a quick walk-through and planned to go back when he wasn't in a hurry.

I hope he does.

Typically, when people talk about a painting that "rewards close inspection," that means they've walked by it a dozen times before finally stopping to take a look. You'd have to have an awful lot on your mind to miss Fuchs' enormous babies, one of which, *Baby Up Close* (2006), stops you in your tracks as you descend the stairs into the basement of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. The infant's head, tilted in a diagonal, nearly takes up the whole canvas, which measures 80-by-120 inches. I thought it looked pensive, even worried, and I found the mood contagious.

Then I turned around and saw *Blue Blanket* (2006), in which a giant, freaked-out baby looks up at its mother in horror, and I nearly fled the building. It's no wonder my friend came away from his brief tour of Fuchs' show talking about weird babies, even though they're in just three of the exhibition's 11 paintings (the show also includes interiors and flower beds). The brat in *Blue Blanket* reminds you how often people lie when they say how cute their friends' babies are. This kid has a face only a mother could love.

The funny thing is: You can tell she does, even though she's turned away from the viewer and nearly cropped out of the image. Once you notice that, the mysteries of Fuchs' paintings dawn on you. How do you know this woman loves her child? How do you even know she's a woman? Somehow you do, and when you start searching what little of her face you can see for evidence, the pleasures of looking take over and take you places you didn't expect to go. The brush strokes that render Mom's cheek clue you in to her tender feelings, and they're wonderful for their own sake.

The longer I stayed with this painting, the less the baby disturbed me. I was too busy swooning over how the mother's one visible eyebrow is painted. When's the last time you noticed, let alone fell in love with, the way a painter does eyebrows?

The way Fuchs plays with proportion and space in her paintings adds to their riveting effects. In the show's press release, CAMH senior curator Paola Morsiani, who organized the exhibition, calls Fuchs' palette "monochromatic." That's not quite true — you'll find pinks, fuchsias, turquoises and any number of other colors — but they're gently washed out, creating a flattening effect on the pictures' planes that Fuchs subverts here and there with unexpected plunges into depth.

These are particularly noticeable in the storage areas in *Kitchen* (2006) and *Linen Closet* (2006), which looks like a joyful riff on Matisse. She tips the backgrounds so far forward in *Baby With Spotted Shirt* and *Woman in Hospital (Charlotte)*, both from 2007, that the figures threaten to slide off their beds.

Elsewhere she lets the edges of appliances and furniture jab into the viewer's space, as in the slightly cartoonlike *Pink Dresser* (2006), which first looks cheerful, then grows menacing as you start to worry that one of the babies might fall and bump its head against it. That's another one of the show's mysteries, which unfold if you're willing to hang out with the paintings and let them work their strange magic. The babies seem less unnerving, but the furniture starts to give you the jitters. And the linen closet, of all things, will look downright hedonistic.

The two flower-bed pictures are probably my least favorite, which is not to say I'd replace them with anything else. They're lush and they bring a bit of the outdoors into these mothers' worlds. Besides, the installation is so perfect that CAMH's tricky basement space looks as if it

#### RESOURCES

#### FRANCESCA FUCHS:

#### PERSPECTIVES 155

- **Where:** Zilkha Gallery, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 5216 Montrose; 713-284-8265; [www.camh.org](http://www.camh.org)
- **When:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. through 9 a.m. Thursdays, noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. Through April 29.

were made for these paintings instead of the other way around.

Fuchs' paintings couldn't look more at home than they do here, which is fitting, since they deal with domestic life.

It'll be a shame to see them go.



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