

'HIGH DESERT DRAMA'
BY BETS COLE



'LINE, VALUE AND COLOR'

Bets Cole's latest paintings demonstrate quiet excellence

Paintings by Bets Cole on display through July at Karin Clarke Gallery show the long-time local artist at her relaxed, assured best.

Cole has been making and showing work here for as long as I can remember — Oregon landscapes, generally (though she did a portrait show recently), well executed and ready to grace a living room wall. She approaches the world with a practiced and sympathetic eye, documenting not just the details of any particular scene but also its essence.

The current show offers us a combination of smaller — 8 by 12 inches or so — acrylic-and-charcoal paintings on panel along with a separate series of large, loose charcoal-on-paper drawings.

First, the paintings. Seeing Cole's deep ease with line and gesture is as dazzling and comforting as watching a good ballerina dance. The dancer on stage charms us by pulling off a difficult leap, defying the tension between expectation and execution. Will she pull it off or will she fall?

Cole's work, oddly, creates that same tension in the eye of the viewer, in large part because it looks, superficially, so easy. Her paintings are so inviting they seem like they might have been dashed off between lunch and a trip to the gym.

But a closer look — and here's that ballerina again — reveals a level of execution that is both superb and reassuring. We don't have to worry about a slip-up. The deeper you go into Cole's work, the more reward you get.

One of the most interesting of the small paintings is tucked away in a gallery corner: a small square image of "Bandon Lighthouse." Its somber dark tones and strong sky offer a marked contrast to the rest of the paintings in the show, which tend toward light and airy.

Another engaging painting — and this one is gouache, or opaque watercolor, and charcoal — is titled "Angel Gathering" and shows an abstracted townscape in the midst of what looks like forested foothills. Its deft depiction of three tall trees is wondrous.

The charcoal works seem to come from a different vision. Besides being bigger, they are darker and a good deal more brooding. "Filtered Light" offers a moody rendition of a bright bit of sky surrounded by dark trees, a scene that is romantic without falling into being calendar art.

Cole has lots of fans in town. She deserves more for the sheer professionalism of her work and the way it taps honestly into basic emotions in the viewer.

Bets Cole: Line, Value and Color runs through July 29 at Karin Clarke Gallery, 760 Willamette Street. Hours are noon to 5:30 pm Wednesday through Saturday.



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