

Obituaries and (mini) Masterpieces

Each year, *Art in America* publishes an “Annual Guide” that includes an obituary section memorializing the notable artists, critics, and curators who passed away within the year. In just two sentences (and sometimes less), whole lives and careers are abridged and packaged into laconic, reusable synopses. Stars of the art world, otherwise the subjects of



voluminous biographies, retrospectives, and documentaries become distinguishable solely by an adjective here, an “ism” there. Robert Motherwell is an abstract expressionist while Willem Kooning (pictured left) is a *seminal* abstract expressionist. Joan Mitchell’s paintings are boiled down to “calligraphic” abstractions; Richard Pousette-Dart’s are “pointillist” abstractions. Lives that teemed with struggle and accomplishments are reduced to their most easily described art genre, a noteworthy exhibition.

Fascinated with the hollow languor of these obituaries, Patrick McFarlin began to meticulously translate such obituary descriptions with their accompanying portraits in a series of graphite drawings. His drawings retrace, with careful attention to detail, the ambiguity of the obituary, the detached, printed summations in pages of a glossy magazine. In this way McFarlin places the artist back within his or her original context—the world of art. McFarlin’s interest in his subjects deepened as the number of obituaries he rendered increased in number.



Haunted by the artists and the stories of their lives, he began painting flawless miniature representations of their paintings. McFarlin’s art expresses an homage in paint that the obituaries alone could not exact. The artist’s paintings are a virtuoso display of technical skill, re-interpreting the exact brush strokes of painters as diverse and challenging as Joan Mitchell (pictured left), Francis Bacon, Robert Motherwell, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Diebenkorn, and Willem de Kooning.

The formal rigor and intimate scale of McFarlin's paintings are reminiscent of the miniatures made by Richard Pettibone (pictured right) a pioneer in appropriation art in the United States. Originating as they do from divergent concepts, the impact and poignancy of Pettibone's perfect miniatures strongly resonate with McFarlin's recent body of work.



In a 1995 *New York Times* article covering a Pettibone retrospective, art critic Roberta Smith asked, “What happens to visual experience when previously large, famous paintings are reduced to the size of the viewer's face, while, at their best, looking mind-bogglingly like the real thing?” She mused that the method is “a new, transformative, maybe original sense of intimacy and ownership that is unusually empowering. It is rather amazing to see art cut down to size with its integrity intact.”ⁱ



Empowerment is what McFarlin grants his viewers along with the artists he covers, while paying a tribute to all of art history's painters of note. McFarlin's unquestionable love for painting is balanced by his humility as he meditates on death's inevitability. By imbuing these miniature masterpieces with precise brush strokes and conceptual integrity, McFarlin re-contextualizes many highly celebrated and iconic paintings in an intimate setting that allows for very personal contemplation and a space for transformation.

- Cyndi Conn, LAUNCHPROJECTS
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ⁱ Smith, Roberta. Imitations that Transcend Flattery. *The New York Times*. July 15, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/15/arts/design/15smit.html> web. 25 Aug, 2010