

ART 309.01

Lazevnick

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### Exhibition Critique: Jan Ross Watercolors

The Jan Ross show: *Watercolors: People, Places, and Things* took place in the Milliken art gallery earlier this semester. As an artist and a gallery worker I have seen and analyzed many shows that have taken place here, as well as the artists talks that go with them. While the work of Jan Ross is beautiful and well done: the set up of the show, as well as the artist talk and works chosen to be included, left much to be desired. Jan Ross is an extremely talented watercolor artist who has studied with some of the best watercolorists in America. She understands her medium and has a good eye for aesthetics. However, it was clear from her gallery show and artist talk that her work lacks conceptual meaning and her main purpose is simply to make money.

Jan Ross's artist talk was quite long and meandering. She walked around the gallery giving lengthy stories about each of the individual pieces. These stories typically involved her traveling somewhere, seeing someone, and asking to paint them, or just seeing an object or a place and painting it. The common theme in this show is that there is no theme. The only thing tying these works together is the use of watercolor. In some ways having a detailed story and memory of painting an old man from a third world country, displayed next to a larger detailed painting of decorative christmas ornaments is disrespectful. Jan Ross's artist talk gave the impression that she was selling herself to us, rather than giving voice to the artwork. Even her artist statement was a short biography followed by a listing of her availability as a watercolor instructor. Her work and her gallery show as a whole probably would have fared better if she had not had a talk at all.

The set up of this gallery was a bit chaotic due to the large amount of work presented with no discernible theme other than of course: *People, Places, and Things*. There was no one piece that had any specific importance, but rather a smattering of many things all at once. The most successful part of the set up was most likely the two paintings of women with purses (*Baggage Claim* and *High Maintenance*) that were set up in the center of the gallery, opposite one another. These two paintings were rendered similarly and anchored the show into a central spot, allowing it to have some sense of organization and structure.

There is no denying the technical skill of Jan Ross. Possibly the best watercolor artist I have ever seen. She embraces medium specificity and allows for the viewer to see the watercolor as watercolor. Ross included natural looking water blotches where you can see the ink pooled up around the edges. This speaks of a Greenberg approach, where the purity of the paint is as important as what is being depicted. Her use of color and broader strokes for wrinkles on skin is particularly beautiful and sophisticated.

The only thing missing from Ross's work is a question. In the mindset of a conceptual artist like Joseph Kosuth: it is art's function to question. Ross's work is more of an exercise in aesthetics, rather than a successful body of art work. It is beautiful, but that is all. There is no conceptual endeavor here, and to pretend that there is one is deceitful to the viewers and also to the people she asked to paint.

The final question for Jan Ross is what is her art made for? Why does it exist? In the end the only answer I could deduce was that she makes work because she enjoys it and it makes money. There is nothing inherently wrong with those two things, however, it does leave us as the viewer longing for more and getting a sense that, like a salesman, Ross is trying to persuade us into buying her work or buying her as an instructor. Overall, Jan Ross is an amazing watercolor artist

with inherent talent and knowledge of her medium. More attention to conceptual meaning and how she displays her work, rather than only focusing on aesthetics and what sells, would allow her to grow as an artist and really take her work to a higher level of understanding and appreciation.