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MATHEW CERLETTY: 'SUSAN' AT ALGUS GREENSPON

by Ken Johnson



"Ikea," by Mathew Cerletty, is among his paintings on show at Albus Greenspon that often portray domestic subjects.

Viewers unfamiliar with Mathew Cerletty's art might take him for a realist painter of domestic subjects working in the Precisionist, photography-based vein of Charles Sheeler. But ulterior motives animate the paintings in this slyly riddling show.

"Ikea" is a color-coordinated still life of a narrow cabinet with flowers in a red glass vase on top. Golf clubs lean against its side, a black handbag hangs from a peg rack and a three-part scroll on the wall pictures an antique skeleton key. With its rhyming rectangles and circles, it seems mainly a conflation of realism and abstraction. But the title hints otherwise, and a glance at Mr. Cerletty's Web site reveals a penchant for social commentary. It reproduces a portrait of David Brooks, a columnist for The New York Times, and a Pop-style rendition of the distinctive, white-on-red banner of The Economist magazine. So, "Ikea" is subtly satiric: a cool-eyed study of an altar-piece for consumerist idealism.

The fittingly titled "Quiet Grace" represents a luminous, peach-colored room where—in a stepladder, a roller and paint tray and a luxuriantly wrinkled dropcloth covering the floor promise quasi-mystical transfiguration for the devout homeowner. An untitled abstract painting, a pastel-hued patchwork of spirals and other geometric shapes, is puzzling until you imagine it as a grace note in someone's perfectly composed abode.

What, then, about "Wall," the life-size, trompe l'oeil of a grungy, concrete block wall where a little wad of gum is stuck in a corner to the left? Maybe it represents the messy reality from which contemporary design offers spiritual protection.