

VISUAL ARTS

Paula Crawford and Hsin Hsi Chen

at Troyer Fitzpatrick Lassman Gallery
Washington, DC

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review by Julie Nelson

The large-scale paintings of Paula Crawford and the diminutive drawings of Hsin-Hsi Chen have one thing in common: both involve numerous variations on a single theme. Crawford derives inspiration from Renaissance lace designs, layering intricate white linear patterns atop murkier grounds which evoke the depths of the sea. Chen invents sparse, unpeopled interior spaces where bright shafts of light cut through the dim and tree shadows creep across floors and walls. Each artist, in her separate way, has established self-imposed parameters within which to explore a chosen focus.

Crawford's six paintings all share the title *Fugue*, and are distinguished from one another by assigned opus numbers, e.g., *Fugue/2* and *Fugue/16*. The works visually mimic this musical form by turning a

small motif (plant and animal forms) into an orchestral whole, stating a theme and then counterpointing it to build greater complexity. What interests Crawford in lace is "simply the beauty of the symmetry and the repetition," an aesthetic grounded in an appreciation

of order. However, not so ordered as to become dull, the filigreed patterns sometimes deviate from symmetry, as in *Fugue/3*. In spots the white paint is smudged across the surface creating floating, glowing highlights similar to those common in the somber and ethereal work of New York painter Ross Bleckner.

A note on the figure/ground relationship: while the lace as "figure" embodies order, by contrast the streaky, loose, patchy "ground" represents chaos. The ground in all cases is formless, done in aquatic blues, greens, and yellow ochre, with occasional patches of burnt sienna. It is painted with gusto and has captured and retained a certain momentum from the artists' strokes. The lace mimics the highly refined intellectual order of a Bach fugue while the ground suggests a moodier, almost brooding nocturne.

Crawford sees her work as "purely decorative." In an interview with Jeffrey Brown, Crawford's husband and Senior Producer for the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, she states with confidence, "I embrace painting and the decorative. I think that is honest." She intends only "to create a field of vision that gives pleasure and that can hold a viewer's interest for more than five seconds." A refreshingly direct aim for those of us weary from the glut of well-argued but badly-crafted socio-political/idea art.