

## Tiffany Calvert, Easton Irregular Art Profile, September 2013

"Abstraction and Figuration spar in an art historical realm..." is how Adrienne Callander, curator at the Mississippi State Visual Arts Center Gallery describes Tiffany Calvert's lush, brushstroke-laden paintings. Looking at them is like witnessing collapse, explosion, dissolution or reassembly. The paintings simultaneously pull together and rattle apart and I'm reminded of engineers' "exploded views" and Sharon Rose's book *How things Are Made: From Automobiles to Zippers*. Engine jockeys, basement tinkerers, and gadget nerds would relate to Calvert's work because it glorifies loose components, things that lay around waiting to be pressed into service. She lifts subject matter from current events in addition to art history, and is as equally bowled over by the masters (Cezanne, Rembrandt, Velasquez, Goya and El Greco) as by society painters (Sargent and Fragonard). She handles paint loosely, yet is in control of the medium, and has a nose for fresh views of art canon. She received her B.A. with Honors from Oberlin (1998), her M.F.A. from Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers (2005), and currently teaches art and art history Instructor at Raritan Valley Community College in Branchburg, New Jersey.

Her painting *Untitled #232* nestles the image of Édouard Manet's *Dead Toreador* (1864) inside a cascade of dissolving drapery, or vague figures, and the fact that I'm unsure is part of the pleasure. Since Calvert's process dismantles and reforms the act of painting, it is interesting to note that Manet cut his *Dead Toreador* out of a larger painting titled *Incident at a Bullfight*, a work that drew harsh criticism during the Paris Salon show of the same year. Manet openly struggled with composition, perspective and the scale of the bull in this painting, and subsequently confused his audience. Yet, the fact that he publically struggled with these key elements opened a door to a new era--Modernism. Today, *The Bullfight*, or the top portion of *Incident*, is in the Frick Collection, and *Dead Toreador* is in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. Understanding the connection between Manet's two fragments, understanding that Calvert has studied Manet, and seeing the way that she jackhammers her painting apart at the same time she lashes it together makes her an informed painter who engages the mind and senses.

*Untitled #239* draws from several sources: again Manet's *Toreador*, an anonymous 17th century Italian *vanitas* painting *Dead Soldier*, a video of the murdered Iranian protestor, Neda Agha-Soltan; and fragments of Rococo decoration. Three images of a supine figure broken into swirls of decoration make an excessive, stylistically secure painting about intangibility, the equivalent of feeling water running through your fingers. Concerned with defining space rather than subject matter, Calvert pushes embellishment past the limit of good taste and puts the viewer in a difficult position: we question what separates bad painting from good painting and, subsequently, doubt our

own judgment. Numbering rather than naming the paintings completes her separation from the subject matter, and I ask: What is her stake in this vortex of confusion and activity? Tiny clusters of pink circular decorations interrupt the overall composition, and I think: No, that doesn't work. But then I think: Well, maybe it does. If death and disintegration look the same as assembly and reconstruction, and my sense of aesthetic equilibrium is effectively knocked out of whack, then Calvert must truly be dwelling in chaos, which means this brand of off-putting painting is habitable and where Calvert will continually be scouting ahead, unearthing fresh images, staying one step ahead of comfort.

Calvert's tiny, lush gem *Untitled (Girl with Dog #2)* channels Rembrandt's dramatic lighting using saturated color while recreating Fragonard's suggestive, sexy *Girl with Dog*. Her smaller pieces operate in a denser, more cohesive space and focus on drama rather than chaos. Sargent-esque, silky, watery brushstrokes pile up, making creepy, abstract but recognizable interacting forms and figures. The large format paintings are more unnerving and strive against the velvety richness of her small works, and I'm curious to see if she might integrate the two kinds of space, since her paintings pull me into a deep vortex as much as they invite me to linger over an opulent surface. Fragmenting images with brushstrokes instead of scissors, her paintings manifest themselves through mood and implication. Overtly, we focus on the excessive mess, the gross confusion of the paint itself—beautiful, baroque, definitely too much. But, covertly, I intuit a story about why or for whom this world has fallen apart; I take the initiative and piece it back together, feeling strongly that it was made just for me. Her style rises from dappled brushstrokes and air, compelling me to feel lucky having just a toehold in a mixed-up world.