



Gary Stutler

Gary Stutler's paintings possess a strange, precise quality about them. The precision isn't hard to see. His works are generally of simple, seemingly unpretentious objects—tables, clocks, dressers, windows, lamps. The paintings work hard to capture the surfaces of these objects; one painting of a wardrobe cabinet, for example, is finicky about getting the varnished doors and wood grains just right, the dim and shrouding light on interior shelves with enough local color, and the rounded edges of each corner with attention to the tapering

off of wood veins and patterns. Stutler has even varnished the surface of the painting with copious layers to approximate the deeply luminous planes of the wooden doors. This is typical of his work; by their very minute descriptions and attentiveness, these canvases declare a patient and laboring process and reveal an astute and tightly-honed attitude of looking and painting on the part of their maker—"left brain painting," Stutler casually calls it.

The strangeness of the paintings is harder to put a finger on. These canvases are hardly *trompe l'oeil* paintings; they make no attempt to fool the eye with any considerable determination. One is always well-aware that they are, with their rich surfaces and nearly hermetic compositions, *paintings*. They are not simple still lifes either; they seem too barren, too devoid of artful manipulation or careful arrangement and re-arrangement. Their sparseness is almost iconic, nearly religious in feel. There is a silence and monumentality about these objects that Stutler's works respect, and painting, it seems, can do little more than reveal those clocks and dressers as objects with a distant and mute life of their own. His paintings animate old pieces of furniture, hinting at more subjective explorations in the past lives of these objects, their hidden interiors, their domestic intimacies and secrets, the possessions they garner and hold, the sympathies and longings that have been placed on them. The objects, his paintings seem to say, belong to an emotional world that is barely audible beneath their clean, hard surfaces.

These kinds of descriptions—tacking back and forth between and obsession with precision on the one hand and a certain and perceptible content on the other—seem appropriate terms for Stutler's work. The two modes are in constant tension and make up an intellectual sensuousness that seems fundamental to the appeal of his paintings. One would like to say that, in a general way, they also neatly characterize the shifting qualities of the artist himself. He is a painter who needs and wants objects before him—possessable, desirable, precious and pristine—but who sees plainly his own and others' cathected discharge. There are other keen and enticing parallels: he is a soft-spoken man with a wry humor, a quietly emotional and passionate talker, a man with Midwestern and small-town roots but with a cosmopolitan sense of culture, a laborer who feels equally at home with "pushing paint" on canvases (as he puts it) and *faux* detailing on furniture. He maintains homes in both western Illinois and northern California, asking himself to negotiate between two different and, one would imagine, deeply conflicting cultures and worlds. It is no wonder that the paintings have a taut eloquence about them that is built into their clean surfaces.

—Anthony W. Lee