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CRITICS' PICKS CHICAGO

Richard Wetzel

Corbett vs. Dempsey
2156 West Fulton Street
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By Troy Sherman | April 8, 2024



Richard Wetzel, Flesh and Blood, 1985, oil on linen, 72 x 44 inches.

Richard Wetzel was considered a B-lister of Chicago Imagism, the category for anything bright, bulbous, and surrealistic made in that city, starting around the mid-1960s. He might have loomed larger had the works in this presentation, "Some Must Watch: Paintings 1983–85," ever been exhibited, but they have mostly been out of sight since their creation. This show, then, is a revelation of a major talent who performed only minorly in his peak time. Unlike what he was producing in the '70s—stilted but exquisitely drawn amalgamations of various bugs—the nine paintings and one drawing on display here reveal an artist who was working so deftly within a late manner as to have drummed up a unique approach to it.

Like many of his works from the '70s, these paintings feature what seem to be insects that don't really exist. In Flesh and Blood, 1985, a parabolic limb arcs through purplish, empty air. Pink cilia stick out of the extremity and gather at its base. An upper lash bends down to try and kiss a lower one, yet the twain barely meet. Unencumbered of basically any setting, the forms demonstrate Wetzel's ability to skillfully accentuate a curve with a curve, giving this composition a delicate weight.

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The artist's refinement of his graphic approach was likewise a distillation of the Imagist idiom. Using background gradients to set off brash figurative elements in the foreground, for instance, was something Ed Paschke had mastered. Wetzel's paintings operate on the same principle, but generally their palettes are limited, and color only ever contours the figures' insides, as though they're backlit by a light box. The depth effect this provides is not dissimilar to that achieved by reverse-painting on Plexiglas, a popular method among the Imagists. By concentrating and combining these techniques, Wetzel developed an uncommonly subtle and pictorially cohesive approach to this Midwestern style.