

DOTTY ATTIE

P . P . O . W

Dotty Attie's work has had a violent tinge for a long time. Since the early '70s, the artist has been remaking familiar pre-modernist paintings, and many of those she has picked have been subliminally or obviously bloody: John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark*, 1778, in which boat-men fight to rescue a swimmer from Jaws's great-granddad; Caravaggio's version of the biblical tale of Judith and Holofernes, an early political assassination; Eakins's, 1875, a scene of surgery. Some critics have also seen violence in the way Attie treats these images, breaking each of them into details that she paints on diminutive six-by-six-inch canvases, which she then puts back together in a composite work that also includes panels of text. The canvases hang slightly apart, and the details can misalign, repeat, or overlap, so that the original image is never completely reconstituted. The art-historical images are further rephrased and refocused by the texts, which tell real or fictional stories around them, often with dry wit. In tension with the fragmentation and the blood are the delicacy and precision of Attie's lovingly painted miniatures, which blend a contemporary woman's skepticism toward art history with an appreciation of that history's beauties.

Now Attie has turned simultaneously to photography and to murder. The works in her recent work are still grids, rows, and columns of six-by-six-inch paintings, but many of the sources from which the images are appropriated are photographs of crime scenes, corpses, cops. There are also views of women washing the floor or ironing, a man smoking at a desk, a Magrittean couple embracing in surgical masks, and more, and Attie shares Ida Applebroog's ability to find the sinister in occupations to which men aspire. A careful colorist in earlier work, Attie remains so even in the more limited palette of the new paintings, a grisaille that suggests the source photographs are black and white. This and the subjects' retro clothes give the work a hard-boiled period look: Attie may have entered the twentieth century, but she is still mining the past.



Dotty Attie, *Little Brother* (detail), 1998, oil on linen, 78 x 24".

The panels of writing in each piece are old-fashioned in a different way: Put together, they narrate fairy tales in which burned or broken bodies are magically restored and live again. Visual and verbal images sometimes match—dogs are both painted and written about in *The King*, 1998, say—but for the most part the correspondences within each work are more indirect. Teased to figure them out, we are neither frustrated nor rewarded, or, rather, the payoff is not immediate: The images may suggest a noirish *policier*, but there is no murderer whose naming would end the story. Instead there is a chain of speculation, reaching into the culture that produces this violence, the sexual and erotic politics in which it is embedded, and the aesthetics of the functional photography become pearlescent, and their subtlety, along with her canvases' trademark dainty size, creates a productive friction with the grim scenes on view.

In the context of Attie's work, a connection suggests itself between the folk-tales' magic of mending fractured bodies and the power of art and fiction to bind fragments in seamless wholes—a deeply consoling gift, but also, potentially, a coercive one. Attie's recombinative process both makes that power visible and subverts it with deliberate faults and disjunctions. And in the images she shows, of course, no such cure will ever arrive.

-David Frankel