

Review: In Robert Russell's 'Book Paintings,' what you see is not what you get



Robert Russell's "Andy Warhol Catalogue," 2019. Oil on canvas, 48 inches by 60 inches. (Robert Russell / Anat Ebgi)

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If you can't judge a book by its cover, how do you judge a painting of a book?

The quick answer: as a picture. But what that means is complicated.

Figuring that out is the point and purpose of Robert Russell's "Book Paintings," a seemingly straightforward exhibition of 11 realistic oils on canvas in which pleasure and frustration rub together. Sparks fly in the mind's eye, raising big questions about fake news and real art — and the thorny relationship between the two.

At Anat Ebgi gallery in Culver City, all but one of the L.A. painter's canvases depict a hardbound art catalog resting on a creamy white surface. That color matches the interiors of most galleries. It also matches the spines, covers and page edges of Russell's books, whose covers display a single painting by a well-known painter and that painter's signature.



Robert Russell's "Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun Catalogue," 2019. Oil on canvas, 48 inches by 60 inches. (Robert Russell / Anat Ebgi)



"Richter Catalogue 4," 2019, by Robert Russell. Oil on canvas, 48 inches by 60 inches. (Robert Russell / Anat Ebgi)

Iconic works by Andy Warhol, Gerhard Richter and Philip Guston convey Russell's interest in reproductions, whether silkscreened posters, photographs or comic strips. Portraits by Rembrandt, Elisabeth Vigee Le Brun, Gilbert Stuart and John Currin take visitors on a whirlwind tour of four centuries of portraiture. Abstractions by Joseph Albers, Bridget Riley and Carmen Herrera outline Russell's love of form and his embrace of artifice.

None of the catalogs in his beautifully painted pictures exists in the real world. Each is a figment of his imagination — a fake publication in a fictitious series.

All have been painted at extreme angles, forming unstable diagonals and receding, dramatically, into illusionistic space. The lushness of Russell's brushstrokes makes the pictures within his pictures seem both ghostly and fleshy, an impossible combination of substance and nothingness.

What's real is the homage Russell pays to his heroes — the painters who have captured his imagination by sharpening his perceptions and letting him see the world more fully and truly — even if that truthfulness includes a good measure of artistic license.



Robert Russell's "Philip Guston Catalogue," 2019. Oil on canvas, 60 inches by 72 inches. (Robert Russell / Anat Ebgi)



"Carmen Herrera Catalogue," 2019, by Robert Russell. Oil on canvas, 48 inches by 60 inches. (Robert Russell / Anat Ebgi)

That's what his paintings do beautifully: make viewers doubt our perceptions and question our assumptions so that we might see reality with fresh eyes — as an unwritten story in which fact and fiction intermingle, playfully and purposefully.

Russell's fake books give fake news a run for its money. Rather than pretending that reality presents itself to us with no room for interpretation, his sly paintings invite ambivalence and uncertainty into the discussion — while leaving each of us free to decide what is what.

Anat Ebgi, 2660 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through June 1. (310) 838-2770, www.anatebgi.com