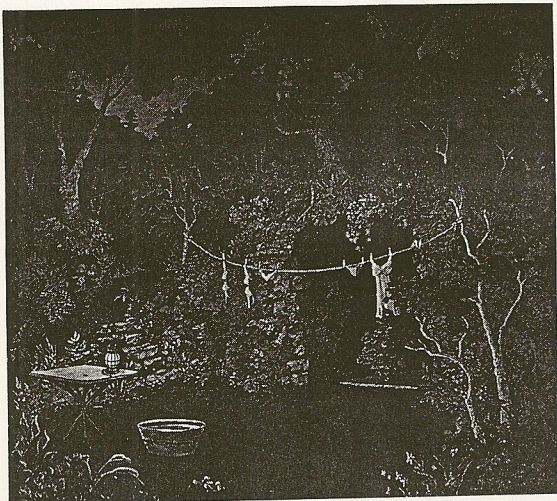


ARTFORUM

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K.K. Kozik, *Hermitage*, 1999,
oil on linen, 32 x 40".

K.K. KOZIK

ROEBLING HALL

To say that K.K. Kozik is primarily an imagemaker rather than a painter does not mean her images could exist just as easily in some other medium. In their fusion of the fantastic and banal into a quirky but immediately recognizable Americana, Kozik's paintings might share certain affinities with, say, Gregory Crewdson's photographs, but her work is bound up with the idea of the hand-made surface, though in the paradoxically recessive form of a kind of all-American plainness. There could be something irritatingly commonplace about how these strange and often resonant images were painted; instead, their very ordinariness often lent an air of familiarity that adds to the credibility of, for instance, a fancy four-poster bed perched atop a craggy desert outcropping like something in Monument Valley, as in an untitled work of 1995—a typically Kozik crystallization of yearning, isolation, and irony. Kozik's canvases have always been frankly illustrative in a way that sets them apart from most of what we'd tend to consider serious painting. Their air of being after-the-fact externalizations of phantasms conceived in the mind's eye instead of solutions to pictorial problems gives them an authenticity almost indistinguishable from naïveté—like a kind of unusually well-schooled folk art.

Still, that her works stem from a mental image rather than a pictorial concept does not prevent them from finding their fulfillment in painting. In fact, several of the eleven pieces in her most recent show, "Wild Kingdom," surpass anything she's done so far precisely because of a newfound painterly verve, a sense that the construction of the image in paint can be just as pleasurable and impassioned an undertaking as the formulation of the idea, if not more so. My favorite is *Hermitage*, 1999, in which the dark mouth of an anchorite's cave—a sort of natural proscenium—is traversed by a clothesline from which hang some provocatively feminine underthings: pink bras, panties, and a slip whose form seems to recall vividly the body of its wearer (this garment *is* a kind of body). The painter's calling is often conceived as a monastic one, but the witty suggestion here is that the artist can have it both ways, remaining discreetly withdrawn while making a public show of usually unseen forms of self-indulgence. But what makes the painting really sing is, first, the beautifully judged nocturnal light that envelops the scene without diminishing its clarity, and then the heady profusion of the almost abstractly rendered foliage all around—not doggedly literal as it might have been in one of Kozik's earlier pictures, but rather joyfully abandoned, manifesting the sort of libidinal overflow that is more explicitly signaled elsewhere in the painting.

The covert theatricality of *Hermitage* becomes overt in *Double Happiness*, 1999, in which a playhouse with deliriously Moorish/Art Nouveau decor is the setting for a live-sex show of fornicating couples (and one solo male) whose unlikely poses happen to spell out the artist's name. The painter's signature, in other words, is nothing other than the ability to give body to signs that point to without actually revealing her.

—Barry Schwabsky