



*The Melting Pot* by Lissa Bockrath.

# Life's a Blur

*Lissa Bockrath's dramatic obscurity*

By Dan Tranberg

All good art pushes boundaries of some kind, whether boldly or subtly. For visual artists who choose to remain loyal to the conventions of two-dimensional art, such innovation is tricky. After all, people have been making rectangular pictures for centuries.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the traditional format of a flat thing hung on a wall may seem like the last place on earth in which you could expect to find anything new. But while 20th-century art was largely about challenging pictorial traditions, a good painting can actually be a very exciting thing to come upon these days.

Cleveland artist Lissa Bockrath's desire to do something new with representational painting inspired her to experiment with the technique of painting with oils over color photographs. The concept itself isn't new. Hand-colored black-and-white photographs were the popular predecessors of modern color photography. But Bockrath, who received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1995, doesn't hand-color photographs; she paints over them.

The goal, it would seem, is to allow the photographic image to trigger a painting. And it works; many of Bockrath's paintings indeed feel fresh and alive. One reason

they work is that they touch upon a way of seeing the world that has evolved out of our reliance on photographic and videotaped images, which are optically quite different from the way the world looks through our plain old eyes.

In her current, too-obviously-titled show, *Obscured Reality*, Bockrath has moved from her familiar images of industrial landscapes to a whole new terrain: pictures of people. Starting off with intentionally blurred snapshots, she builds upon the photographic image with paint, often almost completely obscuring any discernible traces of the photograph below.

*Bockrath's strength lies in her ability to notice and play with the drama of light.*

The result is a definite leap forward. Likable as her previous work was, the dark romance of Cleveland's ubiquitous smokestacks and abandoned warehouses was becoming tired. Plus, Bockrath's real strength lies in her ability to notice and play with the drama of light. The newer work capitalizes on this, sacrificing detail in favor of moody spatial intrigue.

In *Seeking Clarity*, a dozen or so faceless strangers wander in their own direc-

tions while the space they inhabit becomes charged with a strange sense of electricity. Using wildly erratic lines scratched in the fluid paint, Bockrath creates an image that could never exist as a straight photograph, yet probably wouldn't have come about without starting with one. Because of the way the camera's lens distorts the scene, the perspective is skewed, the floor is slightly curved, and the figures in the foreground are exaggeratedly enlarged.

The same can be said of another strong piece, *The World Is Not Flat*. The image shows a procession of anonymous people who

appear to be wandering away from a bright white light, as if they just stepped off an alien spacecraft and are about to return to their regular lives.

Key to the power of both of these works, as well as a handful of others in the show, is that many of the details are left to the imagination. One is reminded of Alfred Hitchcock's strategy of portraying the horror of violent acts not by showing them graphically, but by implying them psychologically.

Bockrath's abandonment of local industrial landscape scenes opens these doors, because that approach prevented her from letting go of exactly the kind of information that held her images firmly within the realm of real places.

Wandering through her show, I found myself thinking not about particular places but of the strange realities of our lives. There's the way we may pass hundreds of people a day on the street and never give them a moment's thought, and the way public spaces are designed to accommodate masses of hurried strangers.

Then there are issues of paint and the traditions of visual art. On this level, too, Bockrath's new work leads to ideas that her former work never touched on. By

starting off with blurred images, she sets up a pictorial situation in which our visual perception is directly called into question. How is it that we look out upon the world and notice some things while remaining oblivious to others? Because everything in Bockrath's initial photographs is blurred, we see only what she wants us to see, what she allows to come through her thickets of overlapping brushstrokes.

This idea is ripe for exploration. As more of the images we see are processed by commuters, and photographic images