

Stephen Scott Young

Stephen Scott Young's spring exhibition at Adelson Galleries in New York City demonstrated a quiet mastery of technique. Young works primarily in silverpoint and drybrush watercolor, and achieves some remarkably refined effects, especially in his portraits of children. One of his favorite models is Cindy, a five-year-old from Gregory Town, Eleuthera, the Bahamas, where he has a studio. He has a special sensitivity to the luminosity of dark skin, nicely handled in *Shy Look* (2008), a watercolor portrait of Cindy in a simple white dress. Sunlight caresses her cheek, highlights enliven her eyes, and the shadow of an earring provides a grace note. Attention is focused on the face; the arms and dress are more loosely painted, and the backdrop is a nearly abstract passage of peach and brown. Young is equally adept in monochrome, as in *Study of Little Cindy in a Flowered Lace Dress* (2008) in silverpoint, a medium, the artist notes, that "allows for no erasing, no mistakes." The detail in the lace and hair-braiding is exquisite, patiently built up from almost-invisible cross-hatching, and the eyes have extraordinary presence. The children depicted are attractive and demurely posed, but far too individualistic and self-possessed to evoke sentimentality. *Study of Little Cindy* isolates the face and shoulders in a field of light, taking advantage of the warmth of the cream handmade paper.

Other works place the full-length figure in architecturally defined interiors. A recent series depicts adolescent dancers in repose, a theme most



Stephen Scott Young
Shy Look, 2008
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familiar from the off-kilter studio observations Degas used for his daringly cropped compositions. There is nothing avant-garde about Young's scenes, but he knows how to deploy the old-fashioned virtues of craftsmanship and empathy, and the results are often rewarding. Young notes he spent ten days on the transparent pink skirt in *Ballerina* (2008), a drybrush watercolor on handmade tinted paper. The young black model is posed sitting on a stool covered with a checkerboard drape; we see the pattern through the tissue-thin skirt. A black-and-white-checked floor and the edge of a window on the right, the source of the light, help shape the space, although the plain brown backdrop wall seems formally inert. The composition is stronger in the less formal *Stagelight* (2009). Two young dancers sit on the floor, stretching, one in simple black, the other in a feathery tutu. They are caught in a trapezoidal swatch of intense light, with the rest of the room, which includes a double ballet barre, in shadow. The counterpoint between the two figures—one bending forward, the other sitting up and looking over her shoulder—is graceful. You can also get a good idea of Young's drybrush watercolor technique here, ranging from the smooth finish of the cool skin tones to the visible brushstrokes of the feathered costume and the floor: the reflection of a pink satin toe shoe on polished wood is handsomely done. His silverpoints of dancers, on handmade paper or gessoed panel, are so finely wrought that the figure seems to materialize out of bright air. The diaphanous tulle in *The Long Stretch*, the feathers and eyelashes in *Rebekah*, the ruffled skirt and creased toe shoes in *Ballerina*, where the dancer perches on the edge of a simple chair (all 2008)—this is meticulous drawing.

Not everything in the exhibition works as well. Young is an admirer of Andrew Wyeth, and a number of still lifes are routine efforts in that sometimes overly plainspoken style. *Seabrook Morning* (2007–08) and *Strings and Buoys* (2008) are ordinary watercolors of ordinary things. A picture of a comely white New England church, *Township Steeples* (2008), is more inviting; the trees and clouds behind the asymmetrical triangles of the façade look brushy and windblown. The artist can slip into illustrational mode, as in the drybrush watercolor *Taking Aim, Eleuthera* (2008), in which two boys play marbles while a girl, Cindy, uncharacteristically sidelined, watches. The influence of Winslow Homer is apparent. Young is at his best with portraits, as in *Old Charleston* (2007–08), a drybrush watercolor of an elderly black woman, Miss Eunida Brooks, on her porch. Young changed the color of the house from green to white, making a more graphic composition and allowing for clever brushwork depicting chipped and faded paint. The personality of the subject dominates. There is a relaxed quality to the brushwork in Young's watercolors, in contrast to the miniaturist's patience he displays in the silverpoints, which demand, he explains, "uniformity of pressure on each and every line."

The Florida-based artist made his reputation in the South, studying at the Ringling School of Art in Sarasota and exhibiting in Florida, South Carolina, and Tennessee, but it would be simplistic to label him a regionalist. He is an American realist blessedly free of theory and trendy conceptualism. His work appears in the collections of the Brandywine River Museum, the Butler Institute of American Art and the Cleveland Museum of Art, among other institutions. Adelson Galleries, 19 East 82nd Street, New York, New York 10028. Telephone (212) 439-6800. On the web at www.adelsongalleries.com