

The New York Times

Published July 13, 2007 | Art in Review

SARAH PETERS, 'Being American,' Winkleman Gallery
637 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Through July 21

By Roberta Smith

In her first solo show, Sarah Peters breathes life into an obsession with the art and history of colonial America. The breath comes from a fidgety crosshatch technique rendered in pencil and black ballpoint pen that gives her images both a gauzy drift and an almost fingernails-on-blackboard screechiness.

The gallery explains that Ms. Peters revisits the naïve, often awkward motifs of colonial art to make them more complete or realistic. Thus "Dreamer," a portrait of a man in the angular style of an itinerant painter, has a trio of voluptuous bikini-clad women in the background, perhaps to show what was really on the man's mind. "Séance" adds intimations of ghosts, or at least moving curtains, to an image of a flower urn, a traditional mourning motif.

But what Ms. Peters really does is make this world seem crazier, suggesting the thinness of the line between the cooked and the raw amid a general atmosphere of chaos and decay. "Still Life With Battle" shows a compote dish of fruit and a background swarming with tiny figures: naked men armed with clubs. And the show's tour de force, a 20-foot-long drawing titled "Being American," shows an Arcadian landscape strewn with columns, portrait busts and neo-Classical statues as well as a woman sculptor, contemplating a nude torso.

Ms. Peters's precedents include Edward Gorey and the early work of both Jim Nutt and Sue Williams. Her alternately waffing and grating drawing style makes her images feel at once romantic and hard-bitten. They may seem to float through the mists of time, but they have a few scores to settle.