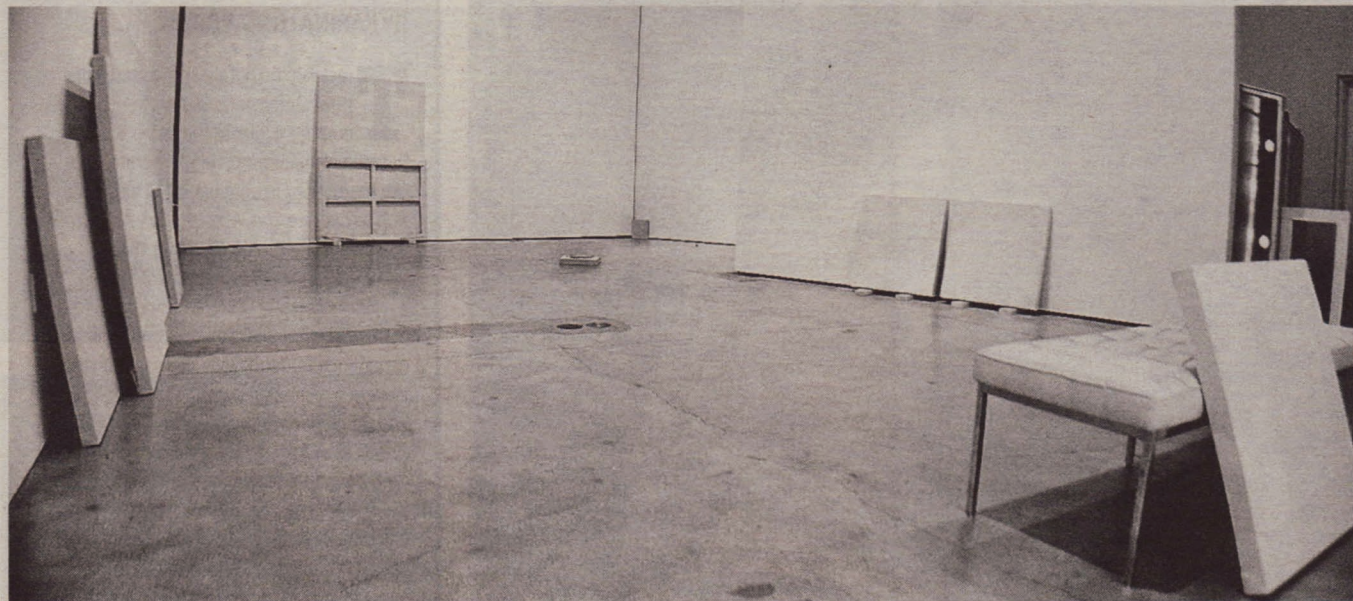


Yes, but Is It Art?

Frances Trombly's *trompe l'oeil* "paintings" at Girls' Club fool the mind as well as the eye.



Todd Roller

"Frances Trombly: Paintings" and "Facsimile"

On display through September 30 at Girls' Club, 117 NE Second St., Fort Lauderdale. Call 954-828-9151, or visit girlsclubcollection.org.

BY MICHAEL MILLS

If you wander off the street into "Frances Trombly: Paintings," one of two heady new shows on view at Girls' Club in downtown Fort Lauderdale, you may well think you've stumbled into an exhibition that is still being assembled. Several canvases lean against the walls as if waiting to be hung. One small canvas lies facedown on the floor. Another stands propped against what appears to be a typical museum or gallery bench. Everything your senses tell you, at least initially, suggests that this is a project in the works, something incomplete.

Don't head for the door thinking you'll return after the show opens. This is the exhibition, and the tricks it plays on both your mind and your eyes is part of the organizing principle behind it. Trombly's specialty — and she is very good at it — is *trompe l'oeil*, a style of painting that fools the eye into believing it's seeing something it's not.

But wait. Upon closer inspection, you'll realize a couple of things that further mess with your mind. For one thing, the canvases are all blank. They're not even really paintings at all but paintings waiting to happen. And even that's not totally accurate. The canvases aren't real canvases — you know, the kind you would actually paint on — but rather simulacra of canvases, made of hand-woven fabric instead of, well, canvas.

Yes, we have entered the realm of Chinese boxes, of riddles wrapped in mysteries nestled within enigmas. Suddenly, quotation marks become essential — we are talking about "paintings" and "canvases" as opposed to the real things. Even the title of the exhibition mocks itself, with a line drawn through the

word "Paintings" to let us know that, wink wink, it's all something of an elaborate put-on.

At this point, I predict you will have one of two reactions: You'll smile or even laugh outright at what Trombly has been able to pull off or you'll feel infuriated at being had. It's the kind of show that either you buy into or you don't, and those of us who are enthusiastic about what the artist is doing may find ourselves in the position of trying to explain the punch line of a joke.

Trombly runs the risk, of course, of coming across as nothing more than a smug hipster who takes inordinate satisfaction in duping her audience. But I think she's

Upon closer inspection, you'll realize a couple of things that further mess with your mind.

much more than that. She's also a master conceptualist and an ace theoretician.

What Trombly is up to seems to be art that aims to stimulate (or even provoke) a dialogue about what art is and what it does, what it can do and what it cannot. Whether her art reaches any conclusions about the questions it raises is ultimately also up for debate. But "Frances Trombly: Paintings" tickled me more than any exhibition I've seen in a long time.

Upstairs at Girls' Club is a group show featuring one work apiece by 17 other artists. And far from granting a reprieve from the aesthetic conundrums stirred up downstairs, "Facsimile" continues them. As the gallery's creative director, Michelle Weinberg, puts it in her brief but excellent handout essay: "Broadly, *Facsimile* refers to the creation of stand-ins or replicas that resemble recognizable images, that seem to be familiar things.

"Rather than showing the viewer some-

thing completely new, these artists uncover the new and mysterious using our own faculty for recognition as a co-conspirator. Counterfeits, *trompe l'oeil*, certified copies, prints and duplications all offer subtle pleasures as a result of their being removed slightly from the authentic original."

A few samples: Jonathan Rockford guts found TV sets and fills them with other substances. Catalina Jaramillo presents a blanket she knitted by hand with her mother and used as a prop in a piece of performance art. T.R. Ericsson "paints" with smoldering cigarettes whose smoke he uses to develop digital imagery mimicking faded old photographs. Rita McBride transforms the monumental public structure of a parking garage into a scale model rendered in bronze painted black.

Leyden Rodriguez-Casanova hangs a set of white miniblinds from one end so that the slats collapse into an oddly arresting form. Jonathan Seliger re-creates a shopping bag from Vienna's Sigmund Freud Museum, lending new meaning to the term "emotional baggage." Ghada Amer stitches colored threads onto canvas, creating painterly patterns that reveal couples embracing.

I identified these specific works only by poring over a six-page handout, a procedure you'll have to follow if you are to learn anything about the art on display. Creative director Weinberg declines to provide wall text for any of the works, leaving us to refer back and forth from the handout, with its thumbnail reproductions, to the actual works of art. It's a trendy but tedious practice that, instead of freeing the viewer, imposes a burden. That quibble aside, "Facsimile" is a marvelous complement and counterpoint to Frances Trombly's creative display of "paintings."

Feedback@BrowardPalmBeach.com