

WENDELL GLADSTONE
ROBERTS & TILTON

Following three New York solo shows, Los Angeles-based artist Wendell Gladstone made his belated hometown debut with four sculptural tableaux (all works 2002). Consisting of stylized, munchkin-size figures standing atop mounds that suggest islands or coastal rocks, Gladstone's dioramas propose an aesthetic kinship among classical statuary, kitsch decorator objects, and animated adventures. Functioning like the stations of the cross—or the levels of a video game—his fragments, read in sequence, tell a tale.

In the first "scene," a marble-white boy in yellow rubber boots and a striped fisherman's sweater stands at the summit of a domed rock, solemnly clutching his catch, a blush-pink octopus. At the next stop, the boy has fallen, and three dogs with jewels around their necks sniff at his feet, having already claimed his trophy. In "level" three, the dogs celebrate with a bloody severed leg—either what remains of the boy or what was torn from him as he fled. Finally, a haggard seafarer, perhaps the ghost of the boy, his avenging father, or maybe the boy-as-man, stands on a peg leg beside three decapitated canines. Their heads and the gems that once hung around their necks dangle from his fingers.

Each island is accompanied by a painted canvas that both abstracts and foreshadows the unfolding story. The painting at the first station contains three cleaverlike shapes, suggesting the approach of the dogs that show up in the second; the next canvas displays three rust-colored rectangles surrounding a blob of pink and crimson, hinting at the carnage that occurs in the third sculpture; and so on. Connecting the sculptures and the canvases are strands of yarn that can be read as nets, webs, or streams of blood, depending on the scenarios they link.

Like a number of artists of his generation, Gladstone shows an interest in mining myths of the past and crafting myths in the present, but while you might work out a plot, it's difficult to attach an allegory or a moral to the story. Loss of innocence, sacrifice and redemption, revenge, the encroachment of violence and materialism: The possible thematic glosses seem endless and varied, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict.

Experiencing Gladstone's work is not unlike looking at art from another culture or images rooted in a system of belief one doesn't hold. One might wonder whether

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Wendell Gladstone, *Boy with Octopus*, 2002, enamel on plastic with textiles and acrylic on canvas, 70 x 36 x 35".

he's probing methods of representation, degrees of abstraction, or the poetics of ambiguity or just pandering to an audience given to the adage "I don't know what it is, but I like the way it looks." I'll err on the poetic side here—Gladstone manages to keep me engaged. I'm not sure what it's about, but I like thinking about it.

—Christopher Miles