

Rose Wylie: *Plastic Bride Profile & Cat*, 1998, oil on canvas, 72 by 136 inches; at Thomas Erben.



ROSE WYLIE

THOMAS ERBEN

Grand and messy, Rose Wylie's big paintings, mostly about 6 feet tall and between 5 and 11 feet wide, depict simple motifs—a cat, a cartoonlike head, a hand holding a flashlight. Broad areas of loosely applied paint are cut into with doodlelike brushstrokes that define details like whiskers or the looping embroidery on a skirt. The British artist's subjects seem to come from her home and studio in rural Kent and from dreams, art history and movies. In her first New York exhibition, which assembled work from the past 20 years, viewers encountered a mix of domestic scenes and objects; a stick-figure Eve derived from Cranach; a lively assortment of women, girls, cats and dogs; and even an interpretation of actress Maggie Cheung from a Wong Kar-wai film.

In *Cat and Skull* (2010), each of the eponymous motifs fills half of the bifurcated composition. On the right, a black cat seen from above appears to be lying on its side, with its head turned toward the top of the canvas. It's hard to decipher this big black shape on the patchily primed canvas, until we make out the features and tail tip rendered in ochre and pale green. The human skull on the left is likewise delineated in a childlike way, with two different-sized dots for eyes and a thin rectangle for a mouth. It's as if Wylie were concerned not with accuracy but with achieving only the most basic legibility of an image. At times, the lines deviate from the color fields that had given the forms their initial definition. In *Plastic Bride Profile & Cat* (1998), for

example, the bride's profile is demarcated by an area of white on the yellow ground, but the red lines that trace her contours follow their own route, only roughly faithful to the white.

Wylie's work follows a faux-naïf strain in English art history (Alfred Wallis, Ken Kiff and Ben Nicholson come to mind). In Wylie's case, the departure from realism is great enough that the things depicted are present to us largely in our own remembering of them (almost as if they were written out instead of drawn in). Meanwhile, the paint is laid on with tremendous physicality. We can see where the brush ran out of paint, where the entire contents of a large tube, blended to a juicy consistency, have been globbed on to cover several square feet of canvas. This discrepancy, between the distantly remembered subject and the intensely present material, gives her paintings a thorny toughness.

It is encouraging that Wylie, who was born in 1934 and received her MA from the Royal College of Art in 1981, is receiving attention in New York. Her paintings have a hard-won idiosyncrasy and convey the seductive sense of not giving a damn what anyone else thinks.

—Julian Kreimer