

Painter Ginnie Gardiner exults in the 'highly lucid charm of 18<sup>th</sup> century Venetian master Giambattista Tiepolo.

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I brake for Tiepolo. But, given the Midwest's paucity of paintings by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Venetian, I rarely have the chance to screech to a halt and enjoy the sight of ancient gods cavorting in the luminous clouds of a ceiling fresco, or soigne nobles in rustling taffeta robes paying graceful homage to painted dignitaries while their hunting hounds- inevitably perched front and center – steal the scene with expressions of bored disdain.

Now, suddenly my favorite Venetian is inspiring contemporary artists, among them New York painter Ginnie Gardiner, whose Tiepolo-themed abstractions are at Flanders Contemporary Art in Minneapolis through August 19<sup>th</sup>. This is Flanders second Tiepolo-inspired show of the summer, following a display of drawings after the master by Jil Evans of Minneapolis.

(In a related vein, Walker Art Center is showing Old Master-influenced sculpture by another New York artist, Bonnie Collura, whose work melds Disney icons with faces, arms and drapery derived from baroque sculpture by Gianlorenzo Bernini, an Italian who preceded Tiepolo by a century.)

"There's just something in the air," Gardiner said in a recent telephone interview from her New York studio, trying to explain this sudden fascination with 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century art.

Given his aristocratic themes and grand manner, there is little to recommend Giambattista Tiepolo (1696-1770) as a model for younger artists. His style and subjects were already antiquated in his lifetime, and he died on the cusp of a revolutionary era that sent his sort of patrons to the poorhouse, exile or the guillotine. Within a few decades Tiepolo fell into a scholarly dustbin, his work irrelevant to the Romantic and Modernist impulses that stirred 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century artists.

Contemporary artists are finding something quite fresh in the master, however – a playful detachment, a love of theater, and appealing beauty of form and amazing draftsmanship.

"He feels so contemporary," Gardiner said of Tiepolo, noting the cinematic way he lights his scenes from multiple sources and poses figures as if they were actors or models displaying their best profiles. His luxurious fabrics, rich colors and offhand

casualness with grandeur-the dogs in the throne room- also appeal to modern sensibilities.

I like what he does with figures- the way they're looking out at you while you're looking at them," said Gardiner, whose interest was sparked by a 1997 show of Tiepolo's paintings at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "I would call it a highly lucid charm. I find myself smiling when I look at his work."

Gardiner graduated from Cornell University's art school in 1974 and, like many artists of her generation, was influenced by the era's dominant styles-pop, minimalism and color-field abstraction. During the 1980s' and early '90s she painted huge kaleidoscopic still-lives filled with glassware and mirrored surfaces that shattered images into reflected fragments. In her paintings, pop musicians, film stars, businessman and consumer goods collided and dissolved into virtually abstract patterns of color and light.

Her new Tiepolo-infused paintings are, in some ways, variations of those earlier abstractions. She mingles details from his paintings and frescoes with scraps of news and fashion photos. They begin as notebook-sized collages that she shuffles until the images fall into pleasing, rhythmic patterns. Then she paints free-hand versions of the collages in oil canvases about 3 feet tall by 4 feet wide.

The Flanders show includes both collages and paintings, and it's fascinating see how adroitly Gardiner bridges the centuries. In "Tiepolo Flight 800" she uses a dominant dusty blue complemented by buff and pink to unify fragments of a contemporary fashion model, a crashed airplane and a Tiepolo pageboy whose dramatic cape fills nearly half the canvas, its folds echoing those of the model's sash.

In "The Message", the face and robe of a Versace model blend into the crimson saddle blankets n a Tiepolo stallion and connect with two antique messengers unfurling a religious banner.

Gardiner is no Tiepolo copier. Her bright, posterish pigments have a typical 20<sup>th</sup>-century flatness, with none of the master's shimmering luminosity and powdery delicacy. Nor does she simply retell Tiepolo tales. He melds gods and mortals into improbably convincing narratives, while she transforms bits of past and present into essentially abstract designs.

Incongruous as her images are, they cohere into thoroughly modern paintings beautifully enriched by their antique sources.

Images: Scorpio's Tale, Tiepolo Honey, Tiepolo Flight 800, and Restless.

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