

Review by Christopher Youngs, former Chief Curator & Director at the Oklahoma City Art Museum

The selection of drawings by Linda Warren in this exhibition spans a time period of six years, but the majority of the works were created since 1989. The imagery consists mainly of commonplace household

objects and familiar motifs, such as the house form itself. Uncluttered and economical in their elements, it is the combination of a clear simplicity with a personal complexity that gives these artworks an importance far beyond the still-life genre. In French, the term for "still life" is nature morte --- literally, dead nature. In these assemblages, the importance of each individual component is accentuated by the combination of elements --- breathing life into otherwise static objects.

The sense of the relationship between the individual elements and the whole, and the corresponding correlations, which may be drawn, are central to a reading of Linda Warren's work. She maintains that her major mentors are her former teacher, John Hadley, and her husband, Cleve Warren. Her former art teacher has become known as a composer of Country and Western music, and her husband is a professional drummer dedicated to the Blues. The themes of many of her drawings suggest the same type of drama often presented in this genre of music: home, family, loneliness, and isolation. However, a closer analogy to music is implied by the method she uses: the object is verse, the combinations are refrains, the images' total content creates the final composition. These visual renderings play upon the senses in much the same way as we perceive musical compositions.

As is the case with the Blues, these drawings are immediately accessible; but, also like the Blues, there is a sense that without having shared similar experiences, we cannot fathom the depths of implied meaning. That is where the extra asset of Country and Western narrative comes into play. With this element superimposed, there is a harmonious relationship between that which is lost and that which is found. In "Strike Zone", there is a drawing of a picture of Linda Warren's son, Anthony, still a child, playing baseball with the intensity of a young man. The title implies a sense of purpose and challenge but the overriding effect ---a result of the house motif---is one of the stability and protection of a home. The baseball is a universal metaphor for the broad sphere of human relations; the home is a symbol of the intimate realm of family life. The passage of approaching adulthood is a time of loss and gain.

Despite the comfort of such familiar objects as vases and baseball scenes, there is an abiding atmosphere of anxiety in these frozen scenes that wait for an action to take place---perhaps to take a swing at the ball. In many of Linda Warren's works there are magical devices at work. The man's hands gesturing in "infatuation" summon an impression of the vase as a container of hidden content. An audience waits patiently and watches carefully for a visual manifestation; but, in this case, it is a leap of the imagination, which creates the illusionary visual effect. A keen sense of absence and longing characterizes many of these scenarios. It is as if we have entered a private séance which attempts to conjure up the past in order to comprehend the present.

In many of her artworks, Linda Warren employs a miniature figure or some manipulation of scale. Clearly, these variations are not actual materials, but rather imaginary elements existing within her arrangement of common objects. Like the summoning hands, an element such as a baseball figure in "Sanctuary" takes on a ritual presence. These combined objects and their implications establish a structure of belief, which transforms the scenario into real-life drama. The arrangement of the actors in these pieces is often reminiscent of a small stage set, with each character playing its part. The overall effect, though sometimes rooted in the harsh reality of the Blues, is one of abiding romanticism of the Country and Western vernacular. In "Heart-King", a mechanical organ makes reference to the recent health problems of Warren's husband. The

cutting, hard reality of this anxiety is healed, however, by the depiction of the glowing life of hope in the home light. Beyond the Blues, both major players take on the luminary effect of a romantic interlude.

The definitive character of cherished items is often diminished by an ambiguous rendering, as if to say, "don't take these things too literally." Even in an apparently straightforward piece like "First Base", there is some confusion about whether the baseball glove may be a vase or perhaps even a sculptural form, such as a work by Jean Arp or Barbara Hepworth---suggesting that once something is posed, as in a still-life, it ceases to exist within its framework of an intended function. In this manufactured context, it takes on a new character. The identity of the object is now defined by its function within a work of art, as a symbol or metaphor with wider implications. Despite these references to the art world, these artworks are not really concerned with an external dialogue; they are based on an internal sense of ownership, with respect to ourselves and our loved ones.

One of the functions of these works is that they force our perceptions, to the extent that the ordinary becomes extraordinary. The basic Blues and the simple Country and Western lyrics may be maudlin, but the sense of ritual magic provokes our sensibilities. Nostalgia is not mere sentimentality, and Romanticism is legitimate theatre, not a romance novel. Unlike Heavy Metal or Acid Rock, these impressions, illusions, and allusions, are not relayed by smoke and mirrors in order to overwhelm the audience with a dramatic display. Instead, they are transmitted by real parts of our existence, subtly moving the listener into the receptive position of nostalgic empathy. While realizing that we are waiting and longing for the unregainable past, we are reminded that those moments are attainable through faithful recollection, and that the application of the structures of memory to our present lives is a critical component of a sense of self-worth. This recognition of the importance of the past is both painful and beautiful.