

Myers, Holly, "Review: Ricky Swallow's modern sculpture feels right at home at Huntington," *LA Times.com*, December 23, 2012

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Review: Ricky Swallow's modern sculpture feels right at home at Huntington

Works by the Australian-born, L.A.-based sculptor are paired with abstract paintings by artist and wife Lesley Vance. The contrast between setting and art benefits the art and the gallery.

Holly Myers



Lesley Vance, 2012 oil on linen 12x10 inches. (Fredrik Nilsen / The Huntington)

In a sunny, wood-paneled, south-facing room on the second floor of the Huntington Art Gallery, visitors who've come to peruse the Flemish Madonnas and Constable landscapes, the cases of stately British silver and florid French porcelain, will happen upon something a little unusual over the next couple of months.

It's not obvious at first. At the end of a hallway at the top of the staircase, a tall, slender sculpture appears framed in a window. It has a delicate and graceful mien, not dissimilar from those of the 18th century ladies in the portrait gallery downstairs.

Come closer, however, and you will see that this is not a lady at all but a loosely abstracted pair of legs, replicated and stacked in shrinking scale, in a manner reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase."

Could it be — modern? Come closer still and you will find a curious detail on one corner of the base: a tear revealing a corrugated surface underneath. Could it be cardboard? Could it be — contemporary?

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The piece is "Descending Figure" by Australian-born, L.A.-based sculptor Ricky Swallow, and it is indeed contemporary: part of a two-person show that marks the first occasion on which real estate in the gallery of the beaux-arts mansion at the architectural heart of the the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens has been given over to a living artist.

Contemporary work has appeared from time to time in other areas, most often in the gardens or wound into other shows. Another example appears in the exhibition "A Strange and Fearful Interest: Death, Mourning, and Memory in the American Civil War" in the Boone Gallery, where a room of truly harrowing photographs documenting the aftermath of the Battle of Antietam is accompanied by a haunting soundtrack by painter and sound artist Steve Roden.

The show pairs Swallow with painter Lesley Vance, who also happens to be his wife. The two have never shown together, but it is an inspired pairing. Swallow's sculptures — which are bronze, in fact, though cast from cardboard — riff on the forms of common objects like coffee cups, clocks and magnifying glasses to produce playful, idiosyncratically elegant works that ride the line between realism and abstraction.

Most are much smaller than the piece in the window, with an objet d'art scale that feels right at home in these galleries. They have a weight here, a sense of gravity and substance, that wasn't as apparent in Swallow's 2011 show at Mark Foxx, where the playful character could more easily be mistaken for glib.

Vance's paintings, strikingly sophisticated abstractions conceived at a wonderfully modest scale — the largest is 21 by 14 inches — involve the layering and scraping away (with a palette knife) of multiple veils of wet oil paint to produce curling, moody compositions that seem to be lighted from within.

As with Swallow's deceptively refined sculptures, whose curves and hollows they feel loosely but constructively in dialogue with, the paintings have a subtle dignity, a classical air, that would be easy to miss or underestimate in the often grosser milieu of the contemporary art world — in an art fair, for instance.

Here, among the wainscoting and the marble fireplace, this quality is happily allowed to come to the fore. It is, indeed, a strikingly beneficial exchange all around: these two young, dynamic artists bring life to these august but static galleries, while the galleries lend the artists a venerable context, illuminating their place in a continuum that goes back for centuries.

In our obsessively up-to-the-minute culture — and in an art world geared almost exclusively to the new and the hot — this isn't an opportunity that many young contemporary artists enjoy.