

# Art style that appeals is the style that is real

Which do you think is a higher art, photo-real painting or a style that rejects it? Silly question, of course — one of those apple and orange things. Even so, that was the question raised in a Victorian London courtroom when James McNeill Whistler sued art critic John Ruskin for what he believed was a libelous review of his hazy nighttime view of the Thames, "Arrangement — Black and Gold." Ruskin said the painting was tantamount to "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."

Whistler told the court that the content of a painting wasn't important. The arrangement of line, form and color was. The jury agreed with Whistler, though not entirely. He didn't get all the money in damages asked for. In other words, the question went unanswered. It still does.

But for those certain that realism is the higher art, this column is for you. When it comes to representing reality, a child-like simplicity known as "faux naïf" (from falsely naïve), can vanquish perfect technique for its sheer intensity.

## Dee Hood

Usually a so-called naïve painter — Grandma Moses, for example — lacks formal art training. But this isn't the case with faux naïf painter Hood. She has two art degrees and teaches at the Ringling school. Right away, you know that she's a primitive painter by choice. She makes the point herself, by quoting 17th-century rationalist Baruch Spinoza: "An emotion, which is a passion, ceases to be a passion, as soon as we form a clear and distinctive idea thereof."

Hood's painting "We Make Our Own Luck" tells the story with a scramble of colorful forms swimming around in and out of recognition, mostly out — like a Miro painting; only more congested. You may be able to spot a small animal and even what looks like a horse shoe, but the majority of her forms are non-objective. Yet, even setting aside the title, you get the sense that this picture is about the chaos that is life.

If Hood had painted "We Make Our Own Luck" in a representational way, it wouldn't have made any sense. After all, when you're in the throes of tumult, you don't pay attention to the external world.



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Dee Hood's oil on wood, "We Make Our Own Luck."

You just experience the tumult. Hood nails it perfectly. The painting is also beautifully composed, as if to remind us that even in uproar, life is beautiful, and you come away thinking that it's the artist's job to order the chaos as Hood does.

Hood is a big fan of painters like Surrealist Joan Miro, as well as the Abstract Expressionists. "The paintings were so filled with mystery and life you could feel the energy," she said. "I knew this was the direction I wanted to take as an artist. I had never been that interested in representational art, I just never connected with it. I like the spiritual/mysterious quality of more primitive work . . . Inconsistencies and conflicts of reason and

passion, this is the nebulous but real stuff of life that I want to talk about in my art."

One look and you know she does.

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SKETCHBOOK



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