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A SUPPORT GROUP FOR PAINTERS

Since it opened in 1993, the Painting Center has been a regular pit stop for devotees of the art of painting. But is it a necessary one? Upon its inauguration, the Painting Center touted itself as “an alternative to the homogenizing gallery scene,” dedicating itself to an art form that is “alive and vital.” Reports of the death of painting are as exaggerated as they are recurrent. But they’re so much a part of the currency of the art scene that it’s all but taken for granted that painting isn’t where it’s at. Setting up an institutional antidote to the nihilism that dominates our galleries and museums is a big job. One that has, unfortunately, proven too ambitious for a venue as modest in scale and budget (and scope) as the Painting Center. The exhibitions there, however earnest, are rarely more than humdrum. Commemorating the art of painting without asking much of it, The Painting Center is less a resource than a support group for the faithful.

The Painting Center’s current exhibition, *Zeuxis Still Life: The Human Presence*, is the first time this space has hummed with purpose. The show was organized by Zeuxis, a self-described “grass roots” confederation of painters dedicated to still-life painting and “a search for aesthetic value.” Named after the ancient Greek

painter, Zeuxis is not only conscious of the genre’s tradition, but of its potential. It was the lowly still life, after all, that served as the foundation for the most radical art of the past century.

Nothing in *The Human Presence* knocks our socks off; some of it is mighty tame. But in an age when radicalism is measured more in elephant dung than by artistic character, the back-to-basics sensibility of Zeuxis is worthy of a high-five. The show’s best-foot-forward collectivism is so winning that the inclusion of veteran painters like Lois Dodd and Paul Georges is, while a nice touch, unnecessary.

It must be admitted that on subsequent visits to the Painting Center, *The Human Presence* lost some of its luster, if none of its initiative. Still, paintings by Tim Kennedy, Suzanne Biggins, Eve Mansdorf and Ruth Miller—whose *Concert Champêtre with Skull* (1988-96) has a beguiling offhand scruffiness—declare themselves soundly and surely. For those who want an idea of how painters maintain their art and motivate themselves—in short, keep their sanity—amidst the Duchampian juggernaut, this is a good place to start. *Zeuxis Still Life: The Human Presence* is at the Painting Center, 52 Greene Street, until June 17.