

BOSTON

MARY SHERWOOD

ZOE GALLERY

Mary Sherwood's lushly painted fantasy landscapes are nostalgic and lyrical pastiches of paintings from the 16th through the 19th century. Images are borrowed from art history and reformulated into reflections on nature and culture. Nine of the ten oil paintings, all from 1987-88, are divided into two series, entitled "Birds of Fiction" and "Myths of Progress." The former are large landscapes on canvas that integrate imaginary allusions to Baroque and American Romantic art, and the latter are landscapes painted on wood with square insets of details from Dutch and Flemish paintings. In this uneven yet intriguing exhibition, Sherwood evoked an aura of mystery and irony while exploring themes of the passage of time. The mood of her recreated worlds is often unsettling. The paintings are laden with symbols of decay and death which often overpower the borrowed Arcadian settings.

The "Birds of Fiction" series — four 89-by-65-inch canvases framed in tinted formica — is populated by a variety of birds in unlikely settings. Sherwood's paintings often resemble macabre reinterpretations of American master James Audubon's famous images of birds in their natural settings. In *Birds of Fiction: Afternoon*, 1987, a heavily modeled eagle perches on a hollow skeleton of a tree, planning a possible attack on a group of unsuspecting pink swans. The flatly painted swans who swim in a nearby cove have the schematic flatness of wallpaper decoration. The dead tree covered with furry vines, Sherwood's metaphor for time and regeneration, appears gothically anthropomorphic; the painting becomes more parody than allegory.



Mary Sherwood, *Baptism in the Wilderness*, 1988
oil on wood, 37" x 37"

Sherwood's strength, ingenuity, and intelligence as a painter are revealed in *True Love*, 1988, an enchanting oil on wood from her more successful "Myths of Progress" series. Placed in a period-style gold-leaf frame, this oil-on-wood tropical landscape contains a six-inch-square inset of a memento mori. *True Love* is a sweetly sentimental pastiche of 19th-century landscape painting and Dutch provincial portraiture, as well as a clearly stated meditation on love, life, and death. The background is derived from a reproduction of a work by Australian landscape painter Eugen von Guerard. In this aboriginal jungle, lightly painted palm trees grace a cloud-lit hazy sky, painted in aqua and peach. A verdant branch of a healthy tree wraps itself around a dried-up limb of a dead tree. Superimposed in the center of the painting is a detail of a vanitas borrowed from a reproduction of a work by Dutch painter Dirck Jacobsz. Sherwood has cropped off the head of the fur-coated figure, who holds a pink carnation (symbol of the constancy of love) in his right hand and rests his left on a human skull (symbol of mortality). Sherwood chooses not to imitate the carefully rendered hand of the Dutch painting or the virtuoso shading and modeling of von Guerard's grove. Instead, she manipulates their already image-laden compositions, and combines them to provide further commentary on the ultimate futility of love.

—Francine A. Koslow