

ARTnews

Boston

MARY SHERWOOD

Zoe

The paintings in Mary Sherwood's latest show came in three sizes—small, medium, and large. (There were also 36 mono-prints.) They all had the same title, *Mnemosyne*, after the goddess of memory and the mother of the muses. And they were all based on the same image, Piranesi's 1776 print *Tomb Called La Canocchia*. Sherwood has appropriated imagery before. In fact, she established her reputation with a body of work in which she superimposed one image onto another, larger image—for example, a detail from a Masaccio onto an Asher B. Durand Hudson River School landscape—forcing a dialogue between two disparate painting traditions.

By limiting herself to a single image, Sherwood draws attention to her handling of paint and feelings about color. In an extended exercise in romantic painterliness, she explores the sensuous act of applying oil paint to canvas, as well as the complex ways in which color works. Especially in her suite of mono-prints, Sherwood shows how color can change the meaning of an image that otherwise remains constant.

The choice of Piranesi's print of a ruined tomb on the Appian Way was itself charged with meaning. One might think of Sherwood's evocation of the past as an escapist fantasy grandisired by the late camp paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, but that would be wrong. Certainly there is a sense of longing for a lost romantic past in her obsessive working of the image of a structure already in ruins in 1776—itsself the subject of romantic yearning by Piranesi—and, after all, she did name the entire series after the goddess of memory.

What's important, though, is that Sherwood chose the image of a tomb. As well as being a bravura display of technique and variation on a theme, the series is an extended meditation on death and mortality. The appropriate art-historical reference is the brooding romanticism of Jacob van Ruisdael's *Jewish Cemetery*, with its juxtaposition of death and ruins. By going back to the past, Sherwood has found the appropriate image to carry her feelings about the end of a century and the specter of death that haunts our times. —David Bonetti

