

The Boston Globe

(N)

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 1986



"A Brief History," from Mary Sherwood's "Myths of Progress" exhibition at the Zoe Gallery.

Romantic premodernism and elegant surrealism

MARY SHERWOOD: MYTHS OF PROGRESS - At the Zoe Gallery, 207 Newbury St., to Nov. 29.

By Norman Keyes Jr.
Special to the Globe

Like many artists working with appropriated imagery, Mary Sherwood quotes art history in her meticulously painted landscapes and seascapes. Her scenes have a pre-20th-century

ART REVIEW

American look - they are picturesque and sometimes even a little quaint - but they are only ostensibly *retardataire*. In fact, they raise timely questions concerning the notion of progress in art today.

Sherwood's wide field of literary and art historical references brings to mind the first full-fledged romantic American painter, Washington Allston, whose "Deluge" she alludes to in the show. Big skies, great wilderness

and swelling seas dwarf the human presence in her work; the paintings are steeped in the sublime, in the awesome, overwhelming forms of nature that inspired so much romantic art.

Sherwood synthesizes imagery from a variety of previous artists' work, reciting that of 19th-century landscape and referring to the early Italian Renaissance in the same painting. But her work generally looks like fresh documentation even if the technique is thoroughly 19th century. And the effect of making different time periods contemporary to each other in one work actually short-circuits any notion of progress here, whether by painting an airplane crash on a Hudson River-type mountaintop or by simply giving the overall effect of a newly cropped, manipulated image to each scene.

In one painting, she fits a detail of two hands exchanging money, taken from Masaccio, right over her repeat performance of Rossiter's "Opening of the West," in which the railroad and chopped trees signal westward expansion.

Sherwood creates numerous ironies by laying an early Florentine image over a 19th-century American one. Through her close cropping, the exchange of money seems illicit, underhanded. It could suggest that the mythic American expansion is about gain, not progress. And by communicating through art historical references, she assaults the notion of stylistic progress in art, in effect to justify an unabashedly premodern and hence antimodern style and romantic attitude.

What makes this show intriguing is that she states her position with feeling and without resorting to nostalgia or the tiresome strategy of pastiche. □