

Art in America

September 2001

Lisa Ruyter: *Gardens of Stone*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 120 by 192 inches; at Leo Koenig.



Lisa Ruyter at Leo Koenig

As a painter, Lisa Ruyter seems to be learning what James Rosenquist discovered a generation ago: paintings of a certain size make the viewer step back. At a large scale, a work is much more likely to induce a physical experience, not simply an intellectual acknowledgment. Ruyter's recent exhibition included 14 paintings and was titled "Imitation of Life," after '50s movie director Douglas Sirk's presentation of the Lana Turner melodrama of a light-skinned black girl "passing" as white. Sirk intentionally used Technicolor saturation and mannerist compositions to distort his narrative plane; both his story and his formal cinematic concerns serve as a paradigm for the clash between content and structure that is at the heart of Ruyter's discourse of representation in painting. This is fine: but here, scale is truly the deciding factor. Ruyter makes her point best by sheer force of spectacle.

Ruyter based her lavish paintings on heavily cropped

and awkwardly angled snapshots of an array of burial grounds: Brompton Cemetery in London, Boothill Graveyard in Tombstone, Ariz., and Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, among others. With bright hippie colors, coloring-book-flat space and—this time out—remarkably sophisticated and poetic use of color, Ruyter creates eerie, haunting and wistful visual compositions.

But here's why size matters: several smaller works focus on tombstones like a groupie's keepsake rubbings and make one want to grab them up like souvenirs. Their visual easiness allows the artist to occasionally sentimentalize the content and oversweeten the color. The four or five large panoramas, on the other hand, are more impressive. They make especially good use of a complicated array of compressed spaces, ensnaring the eye in a web of color that spreads out across the canvas like a prismatic paint-by-number diagram. Ruyter's double vision continues to flicker from form to content and is best exemplified in the show's centerpiece, *Gardens of Stone*, which is 10 by 16 feet. This is a complicated, beautiful painting in which a cemetery pathway recedes so dramatically into the deep background that it seems to flee the rows of mausoleums on either side of it. It reads as a subtle, compositionally and emotionally compelling allegory about death itself.

—Robert Mahoney