

Opinion

Royal Infants

BY ROBERT LONG

Large, grave babies in dresses or christening gowns are the subjects of Melora Griffis's 15 paintings at the Pamela Williams Gallery in Amagansett. The infants are seen in a series of gestural improvisations that focus on their faces, more specifically, on ways to capture volume by expressionistic means. The pictures give the impression that Ms. Griffis works quickly; backgrounds have been rapidly brushed in, and the dresses are made of broad strokes.

Many an infant has been translated to canvas since baby Jesus came down the pike, and a subtle layer of resonance is gained by alluding to that tradition. And because Ms. Griffis is at least as interested in the physical texture of paint as she is in her subjects, she reminds us of painters like Auerbach, Freud, and Bacon, who are as rooted in tradition as painters can be, yet place emphasis on paint as paint.

Further, some of these pictures are six feet high, and the babies have faces the size of dinner plates, so you feel as if you're in the presence of an unhappy royal infant from the 16th century — an incipient monster — as well as an exercise in modern art.

Ms. Griffis knows when to stop painting — in this case, at the moment the babies assume a spark of life, no sooner and no later. You can imagine her hastily filling in the rest of the picture once she has reached that point, and moving on to the next canvas.



Big babies go eye-to-eye with viewers at the Pamela Williams Gallery, where Melora Griffis's portraits of infants are on view.