STEWART GOLDMAN, "Variation on Ruebens #16," oil on linen and wood, 110" x 110", 1992.

Stewart Goldman

Toni Birckhead Gallery
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Why Rubens? is a question one brings to this show of the latest work by Stewart Goldman, titled "Variations on Rubens." Certainly the popular image of the courtly painter of ripe nudes and florid chapeaus so completely reflects a specific place and time that it seems unlikely for it to survive the voyage from seventeenth-century Flanders to twentieth-century Ohio without undergoing a violent (or ironic) transformation. Initially, it may be useful to define Goldman's "variations" by a series of negations: First, these large pictures are not homages, in the manner of Balthus's copies after Piero della Francesca, nor are they pastiches, in the manner of Larry Rivers's renditions of Rembrandt. Goldman's variations are not ironic, but earnest. He uses them in the musical Goldbergian sense of deviation from an elaboration on a theme—specifically on one picture, *The Feast of Venus* (1632), a vast tableau (itself an improvisation of Titian's *Children's Festival*) that depicts the crowning of Venus and the dancing of her attendant nymphs, putti, and satyrs. That this rather ordinary picture serves as an impetus for Goldman's elaborations only points to the fact that Goldman's intent is not to master a subject but to do battle with a certain consciousness and, in consequence, a style. Just as Harold Bloom argues in *Anxiety of Influence*, the son necessarily misreads the father in order to meander from his shadow and move into his own, hard-won revisionist light.

Rubens's *il dolce mondo* (the sweet world) is a result, more than anything, of a stunning virtuosity. On closer inspection, the sweet world is not as giddy as it first appears—for every *Garden of Love* there is a boar, lion, or wolf hunt; for every *Assumption Of The Virgin*, there is a war (*e.g.*, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, *The Battle of the Amazons*, etc.). If Rubens was a great painter, it is due to his complexity; fascinated by both innocence and deliquescence—by the charged moment in which the conqueror and the victim recognize each other and change roles. It is this electric instant of counter-transference that Goldman may be drawn to, as his signature subject (evident in the impressive, recent retrospective at Emery's Machine Shop Gallery) is anxiety, specifically as it pertains to sexuality. As Kierkegaard noted in his *Concepts of Anxiety*, "without sin there is no sexuality, and without sexuality, no history." The private encounter that becomes the historical moment is Goldman's most characteristic theme: as seen in *Diana & Actaeon* (1984), *Samson & Delilah* (1984), and *Tarquina & Lucretia* (1983).

In choosing the silly *Feast of Venus* as a starting point, Goldman, at first glance, seems to have moved purposefully from his former high seriousness to concentrate on formal values. Indeed, the earliest *Variations* (*#10* and *#11*) retain the shape, the schema, and the panoramic focus of the original picture. On these long rectangles of unprimed linen, calligraphic strokes in deep greens, reds, and umbers suggest contour and movement, but only occasionally cohere as images, resulting in a strained composition—at once strenuous and static. In an exultant breakthrough, however, Goldman introduced the grid, a modular arrangement of alternating blocks of color. The remaining four paintings employ the grid as either a ground (*#13*) or as both ground and frame (*#14*, *15* and *16*). His swerve from Rubens's umbers and siennas in favor of effulgent, almost Mannerist greens and fuschias provides a luxuriant backdrop for his lighter contour strokes. Finally, Goldman shifts focus from the panorama (in which each group of figures had equivalent visual importance) to a close-up of a peripheral tableau: a frieze of satyrs and nymphs who raise tambourines in a circular dance. By concentrating on this encounter—between the willing nymph and the leering satyr—Goldman provided himself not only with a musical motif he can alter and repeat but also with a theme: the mask—the play between pagan revelry, sensuous delight, and civilized measure.

In *Variation On Rubens #13*, the dancers are at once gorgeous (the nymphs' luscious lime green flesh) and grotesque (the principal satyr's snarling mouth and loutish hands) while the tambourine held aloft proclaims *carpe diem*. The charged distance between the soon-to-be lovers contrasts with the comic distance between the satyrs and nymphs of the peripheral pairs—one nymph looks toward another couple and one looks away from the revelry and toward the viewer. This counterpoint announces a second theme: the ironies of attraction and discomforts of desire. It also introduces humor, an element almost entirely absent from Goldman's previous works. It is as if the painter, represented by the self-possessed nymph who looks outward, playfully mocked not only the viewer, but Rubens himself. This radiant detachment is what the last two spectacular pictures celebrate. With a brilliant shift, Goldman turned the canvas over on its side and in *Variations #15* and *#16*, the diamond (composed still of rectangles and color) becomes the shape of the canvas and the interior unit of design. Since the interior ground is darker than the luminous, lighter grid that is the frame, the pictures seem to float from the wall. The result is that the *carpe diem* melody of the original exercise is addressed and altered and the six *Variations* become an extended meditation on the tension between rapture and ratiocination, sensuality and caprice. The triumph of this show is that the argument is resolved. Goldman has looked at the darker aspects of Rubens and has come in touch with spirited and joyous aspects of himself. In the process, both painters have become more interesting.

Price range: $8,900 to $12,700.

Maureen Bloomfield