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ART IN REVIEW: JERONIMO ELESPE

By Karen Rosenberg

*John Connelly Presents  
625 West 27th Street, Chelsea  
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Small paintings are showing up in some big places these days; Tomma Abts and Elizabeth Peyton at the New Museum, Karen Kilimnik at the Whitney Biennial. Jeronimo Elespe, a younger artist working in a pint-size format, seems destined for this kind of recognition. In his first show at John Connelly (and his fourth New York solo) he conveys metaphysical depth and psychological distance in panels as small as 4-by-4 inches.

Mr. Elespe — from Madrid — makes portraits, landscapes and interior scenes with an eye to the great Spanish painters. Gray, found in the backgrounds of paintings by Goya and Velázquez, is the dominant color and mood. The androgynous, silver-haired subjects of “Tio R.” and “Mari S.” (both 2008) look like apparitions in an antique mirror.

Mannered portraiture remains Mr. Elespe's great strength, but several landscapes are noteworthy for their highly worked surfaces and nocturnal palette. In “Sin Sapos” (2006-8) minuscule ripples of midnight blue over black create the illusion of cracked varnish. The heavily impastoed “Lower Garden” (2006-7) and the nearly iridescent “Untitled (Garden)” (2005) have a cumulative beauty, a result of small adjustments made over many months.

The size of Mr. Elespe's paintings may be less relevant than their weight, which is formidable.