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Art in Review
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by Roberta Smith

Leidy Churchman's sly, tenderly wrought paintings both sort out and blur issues of gender and sexual orientation with a quasi-naïve, sometimes folkish style. His use of oil on beautifully grained wood panels that are often left partly bare enhances the glow of wholesome normalcy.

There is pictorial as well as social wit. In "Carrot Necklace" a man is seen from a high angle, his face tilted up toward us. He sits on a Burberry plaid circular rug, which reads as flat, with a friendly looking dog between his knees. His carrot necklace is a phallic, back-to-the-land pendant. His hand rests on the chest of another figure, probably a man who lies beside him, naked, with a pizza-fig leaf that is shown in perspective, like the body beneath it. The sexual and emotional ambiguities turn into irresolvable spatial contradictions when you realize that the second figure could almost be seen as standing — except for that pizza, and a few other details.

These details are wonderful throughout. The conjoined faces in "Beard Gods I" and "Beard Gods II" float on expanses of wood, sharing the same beard, like some Norse decorative motif made flesh. Far below them, tiny blankets are arrayed with a watermelon, in one case, and bottles of water and mustard in the other; a little picnic or votive offering seems to be in the works. Similar objects recur in a group of small sculptures that are mostly ready-mades deftly altered to sharpen their emotional pitch.

Mr. Churchman's savvy extends to art history. A painting called "Purple Pals" shows two buff guys or possibly hunky gals at the beach, wearing little more than sailor hats and matching strap-on dildos, and evokes the erotic watercolors of Charles Demuth.

"Hug" shows another youth of unclear gender, sitting on a toilet hugging a cat, whose beautiful fur covers the gray spectrum. The intimacy of the image can evoke Mary Cassatt's depictions of mothers and children. Taut and deliberate, Mr. Churchman's paintings brim with emotion and quietly, but surely, form a remarkable debut.