

## William Harsh taps the believable, imaginable

By **Kenneth Baker** Updated 6:21 pm, Friday, November 9, 2012  
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**IMAGE 2 OF 3**

"Uphill" (2011), oil on canvas by Harsh.

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Vessel Gallery in Oakland has given Benicia painter **William Harsh** the sort of retrospective that his work has merited for years.

Sadly, though he was intensely involved in preparing the show, Harsh died of cancer at 59 just a week before it opened.

Harsh studied at Boston **University** with **Philip Guston** (1913-1980) and **James Weeks** (1922-1998), and his work had only begin to outrun their influence. The palette of Harsh pictures of the 1990s, such as "The Dresser" (1990) and "Easel for Vincent" (1993), owe something to Weeks' example.

The academic exercise of describing an arbitrary still life setup endures, as it did in Weeks' art, in a Harsh painting such as "The Raft" (1999), even though we cannot tell fiction in Harsh's work from description.

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From both mentors Harsh absorbed a strong sense of the propositional nature of painted images - the need to *put* something there, something as believable to the eye and imagination as the stretched canvas support.

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But the charismatic Guston - then in the throes of his own late figurative style - plainly impressed upon Harsh his notion that paintings must prove themselves by the sorts of answers they offer to two questions: What is it? Where is it?

Try putting these questions to an earlier work in the Vessel show, such as "The Dresser" (1993) and a late one such as "Uphill" (2011).

Ambiguities disturb the space of "The Dresser": shadows look solidier than the objects that cast them, the floor and molding that frame the scene tilt up and away like a billiard table against cornerless walls. But we can assign names to most of what we see.

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## Linda left Blue Bloods - But for good reas

What should we call the shambles on a slope against a green horizon in "Uphill"?

It has vestiges of nameable form: fragments of easel, perhaps, the neck scrolls of string instruments or feet of antique chairs. But the composite figure has neither identity nor scale. Not even the crackled slope or viridian background proclaims itself land, sea or architecture. Yet everything looks as tangible as a doorknob.

Various Harsh paintings, such as "The Last Duchess" (2012), show how he learned from Guston an idiom in which to think for himself about other sources that fascinated them both - in this case, Picasso.

Harsh's inventions could bait him into overworking them, but the best among them, the least forced, further the delirious figuration of which Guston served first as a one-man avant-garde.

**Inside Out, a William Harsh Retrospective: Paintings and monotypes:** Through Dec. 1. Vessel Gallery, 471 25th St., Oakland. (510) 893-8800. [www.vessel-gallery.com](http://www.vessel-gallery.com).

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