

Matthew Benedict

Mai 36

Zurich

Stepping into this accomplished show of paintings and sculptures by New York-based Matthew Benedict, one was transported from landlocked Zurich to some indefinite seaside locale. Although all were nautical in subject matter, the works in “Eight Bells” nonetheless touched on a wide spectrum of themes.

Two of the principal paintings, *Eight Bells at the Wreck* (2005) and *Eight Bells at the Pier* (2005–6), depict seemingly clandestine nighttime rendezvous. Inky blues dominate the gouache-on-wood scenes and dusky light hides the characters’ identities, creating ambiguous emotional overtones. Yet each image’s muted palette is cut by yellow accents—like the red daubs in Canaletto’s Venice seascapes—bringing lightness to works that would otherwise have been somber. In counterpoint, *Nearly Gone* (2005) renders a foundering ship in a mix of umbers, pinks, reds, and oranges, making the disaster look almost festive. Benedict played with the fantastical as well; a sea serpent appeared in no fewer than four works. Its presence ranged from central, in *Eight Bells in the Nursery* (2006), to peripheral, with three loops of tail surfacing in the distant surf of *Nine of Hearth* (2005), a boat-launching scene that called to mind Winslow Homer’s heroic sailors.

Despite the range of themes and allusions, a strong suggestion of narrative bound the paintings together and evoked an oceanside milieu of an antique sort, accentuated by Benedict’s deliberate aging of many works. Often what first



Matthew Benedict, *Nine of Hearth*, 2005, gouache on wood, 48 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 60 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Mai 36.

appeared to be three-dimensional elements, like weathered gold-leaf frames or tears in a painting’s surface, were actually trompe l’oeil tricks. His ventures into sculpture, such as a model ship covered in white latex emerging from the white wall of the gallery, were so low-key that they functioned less as free-standing artworks than as side players to the paintings, reinforcing the show’s maritime mystique. —Marc Spiegler