

Rouaud, Darlene Wall at Karen Mitchell Frank

By Karen Mitchell Frank

What: Rouaud (Isabelle du Toit) and Darlene Wall at Karen Mitchell Frank Gallery.

Background: In the past year or so, this tony gallery in the Knox-Henderson area has become a space to watch. It has added several talents to its stable, which previously



concentrated on conservative, saleable names, and has rethought both its mission and exhibition scheduling.

This exhibition demonstrates the gallery's widening niche. Both artists paint in oil and focus on the marvels of nature, but from very different points of view.

Houston-based landscape painter Darlene Wall characterizes the gallery's old guard. Represented here since 1999, the Texas native shows serene vistas of the Hill Country, Wyoming, Maine and California that are traditional and straightforward, with a hint of impressionism.

Isabelle du Toit— who calls herself Rouaud in honor of her grandmother, a ceramics painter — is a strict realist but isolates her subjects in front of clean white or brooding black backdrops. Born and raised in France, she moved to America in 1997 and arrived in Dallas a year later. She was represented here by Elliot Yeary Gallery before it moved to Aspen, Colo., in early 2000.

How it looks: Rouaud's works spotlight individual aspects of the natural world so that the viewers may "consider the plight of nature in the face of man's encroachment." Tiny birds, reptiles, insects and fruit are rendered in vibrant hues and to exacting standards that are dramatically highlighted against the plain backgrounds. Some of her pieces are so stark that they can be mistaken for unfeeling, academic exercises, but the meticulous detail in the brazenly colored *Blue Butterfly on Wall* and the playful, shy *Tortoise* comes from admiration, not objectification.

About nine months ago, she switched from white to black to isolate her objects even more. The dainty *Chick in Darkness* and striking *Grasshopper*, the latter including a pumpkin and two acorn squash, are among the best of this series. Perhaps the most impressive piece, however, is *Tex*, a lounging light gray Great Dane with piercing red eyes and rigid, attentive ears.

Ms. Wall's paintings are comparatively calm and unassuming but not without emotion. The cloud-filtered light makes the mountains and prairie in *Distant Thunder* appear angry, while the gentle ripples in the lake depicted in the nearby *Reflections - Pond Series* almost immediately quell such feelings.