

ART PICKS OF THE WEEK

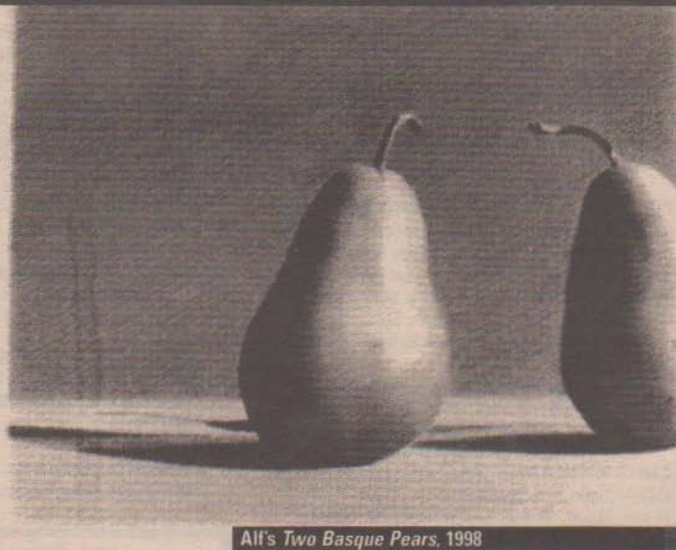
MARTHA ALF, LINDA STARK

What people so often forget is that the quote goes, "Mere consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Consistency without the mereness makes for a highly workable artistic signature style, the kind Martha Alf and Linda Stark are both admired for. Alf's goes back some three decades. In that time she has never tired of rendering solitary pieces of fruit in luminous ambient light, and she has rekindled our interest time and time again by giving such weight, in such graceful ways, to the subtlest of nuances: the position of the persimmon, the jaunt of the pear's stem, the length or intensity of the fruit's shadow, even the visual depth and light quality of the medium used. This particular show of Alf's is especially gratifying because it effectively contrasts media, notably drawing media against color photography; emphasizes varieties among pears in an almost sculptural way; and veritably basks in the depiction of natural light, which Alf conveys as plangently in gray pencil as she does in color pen or pastel. One drawing in particular posits three squat pears before a rolling, brooding, atmospheric background, a rare and wonderful example of Alf going into detail (however indistinct) about landscape.

Linda Stark's signature style, developed over the last dozen years, keeps her paintings small, thick and objectlike. The shaped canvases turn almost dopey simplifications of real things into signs — signs that often signify the body as a site of purity, desire, eventual corruption and ultimate transcendence, but just as often signify the very process of signification with cartoony paraphrases (sweat drops, licks of flame, even a Barbiesque hairdo-shape) and post-Ruscha word-paintings, notably two hot pink numbers painted thickly enough so that the red of the letters looks like lipstick-tinted tattoos. One reads "no cigarette," the other, "LAS" — the artist's initials. Signature style, indeed. Stark's style is signature as well in that it seems almost to grow out of her name: Her imagery is clean, high-keyed, unelaborate (except in the smooth but countless brushstrokes) and suggests voluptuous Jungian archetypes.

Martha Alf at Newspace, 5241 Melrose Ave.; (213) 469-9353. Linda Stark at Angles Gallery, 2230 Main St., Santa Monica; (310) 396-5019. Both thru May 23.

—Peter Frank



Alf's *Two Basque Pears*, 1998