



Painter Irma Cavat demonstrates her flair for blending meticulousness with the surreal

# Nature once removed

By Josef Woodard  
 NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

## ART REVIEW

**Painter Irma Cavat**, a New Yorker who came west to Santa Barbara decades ago to join the UCSB art faculty, has been pleasing and confounding our minds and eyes for many years. In Cavat's art, preconceptions and -ism-based assumptions are routinely given the slip. Still-life tradition, varying shades of surrealism and dreamtime imagery, and a realist technique converge, but never with pat or predictable tactics.

Now retired from UCSB after 34 years there, Cavat's work pops up from time to time around town, sometimes in surprising outposts. This month, she arrives in the centrally-located Patty Look Lewis Gallery, with some de-centralizing, deceptively lucid canvases.

"Chaos and Compassion" is the naturally eye-seizing showpiece, and it's not just the dream-logical presence of a calf seated at a disheveled table that pulls us into its hypnotic vignette. Oddly flamboyant in terms of ambience and presentation, yet elegant and restrained with its white-gray-black

### 'IRMA CAVAT'

**When:** through Aug. 30  
**Where:** Patty Look Lewis Gallery, 25 E. De La Guerra St.  
**Hours:** Noon to 5 p.m.  
 Tuesday through Saturday  
**Information:** 965-2525, [www.pattylooklewis.com](http://www.pattylooklewis.com)

palette, the wide, weird painting is demurely commanding.

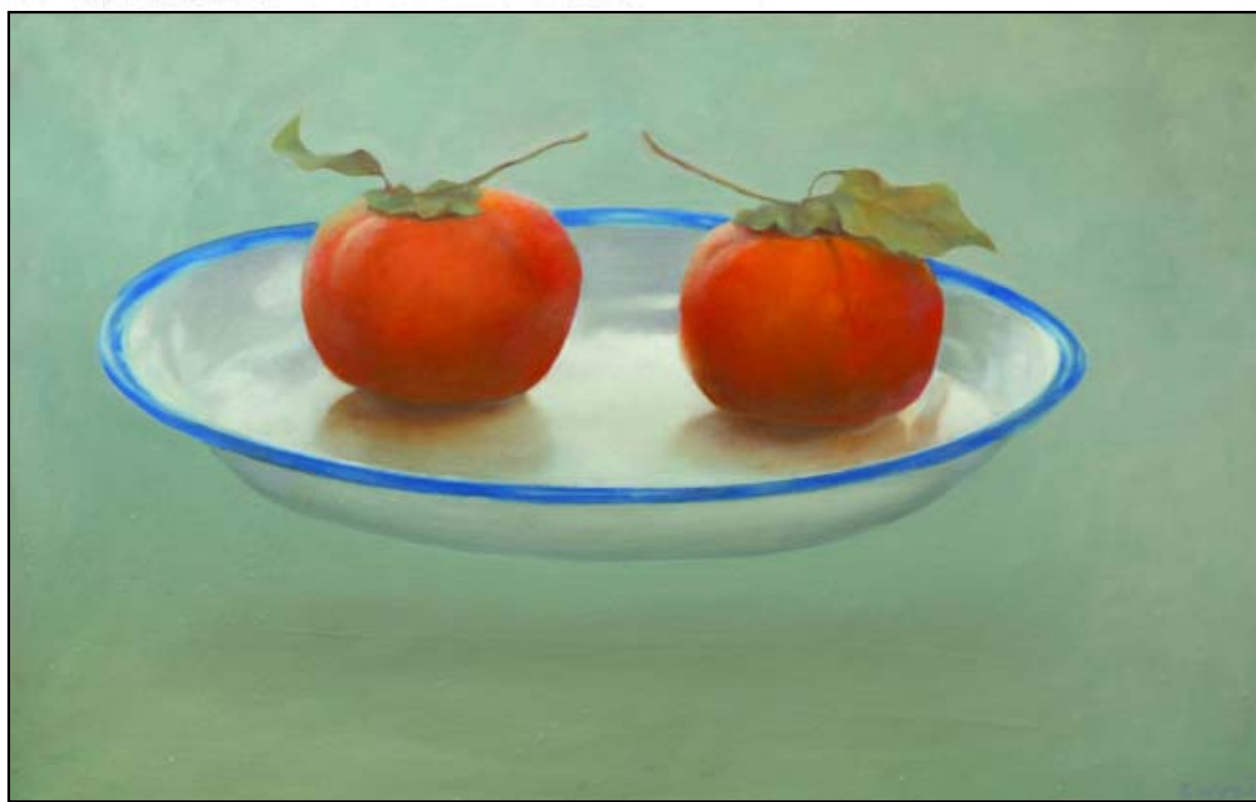
Cavat studied with Willem DeKooning — an influence detectable only beneath the surfaces of her work — and also modeled for surrealist icons Salvador Dalí and René Magritte — whose imprints are more readily gleaned in Cavat's work. One glance at her alluring 2002 painting "Simon and Priscilla in Love," with its plate of amorous fruits in the sky, and it's hard not to cross-reference Magritte's magical irrational wink.

"Balance," from 1997, is about the title and also its opposite, as it finds the painter lavishly detailing bottles and ceramics, a shelf, a glass decanter and a slightly

danger-infused feeling of delicacy. Even what appears like the straightest painting in the gallery, her lustrous and large-scaled still life painting "The Japanese Basket," circa 2000, tickles our quirk-detector. The bold work makes a grand statement for an ostensibly uncomplicated still-life painting about the secret lives of pomegranates.

Cavat calls a 1997 diptych "Rashomon," after Kurosawa's classic film, which has become a modern emblem of slippery narratives and rubbery facts, viewed from alternate perspectives. It's a fitting title in this specific case, with its altered vantage points on the strange sensuality of pomegranates (a recurring Cavat subject).

From a broader perspective, as well, Cavat's paintings seem to contain "Rashomon" — like fluidity of meaning and metaphor. We're drawn in by the pictures and the artist's skill in creating them, and lured into a dialogue — internal or otherwise — in trying to unravel their mysteries. As the mind ponders, the eye tends to keep coming back for more. ■



Still-life art is the focus for Irma Cavat, as it is in "Simon and Priscilla in Love" and "The Japanese Basket," above left. Cavat goes in a different direction with her "Chaos and Compassion," top.

**Patty  
 LOOK  
 Lewis  
 Gallery**

*Five Generations in Santa Barbara Art*