

**David Robilliard at
Hirschl & Adler Modern**

An English poet and writer who died of AIDS-related causes in

AN ACORN ON A TREE



DAVID ROBILLIARD 1987
AN ACORN ON A TREE IS DESPERATE TO BE

David Robilliard: *An Acorn on a Tree Is Desperate to Be*, 1987,
acrylic on canvas, 39 1/2 by 59 inches; at Hirschl & Adler Modern.

1988 (he was born in 1952), David Robilliard made faux-naïve paintings that feature brief, quirky texts embellished by linear figures—the drawing reminiscent of early David Hockney. Words and images are executed in a careful yet spontaneous manner in finger-thick lines of black and unmixed primaries on snowy white grounds. The canvases, the largest dimensions of which range from 3½ to 6 feet, are signed in bold printed letters as though the artist were a proud

12-year-old. They're as legible as can be—more like signs than paintings—and work best from a middle distance, where the viewer doesn't perceive their mundane materiality.

Robilliard's paintings walk a fine line between the inconsequentially whimsical and the poignantly poetic. At best, a mythic feeling is evoked. For example, the text of *Tidal Surge*, which is printed in black letters over four female heads (the title is set out in big red letters at top and bottom), reads, "She moved and walked away/Everybody's eyes strained not to look/But like the tide her pull could not be denied." The association of nature, the "eternal feminine" and worldly eroticism in such economical condensation is quite wonderful. Other works suggest a more personal sort of yearning. *High on Serenade* reads, "The image of your face/ and your fun/ fill my brain/ what's your name." And there are some with an edge to them, even intimations of anger. "Don't be weak-kneed about it," commands one; another aphorizes, "The people you like least/ are the most persistent/ The people you like most/ are the most evasive." In all of these works, the fragmentary heads included by way of decorative punctuation enhance the childlike attitude but contribute only obliquely to any narrative substance.

There's something undeniably charming about the ironic silliness of Robilliard's art, its refusal to be self-important, its touchingly sentimental undercurrent and its small moments of poetic revelation. There's an intriguing eccentricity about it, too, that calls to mind such artists as McDermott and McGough, René Ricard, Cary Leibowitz or Trevor Winkfield. Like those artists, Robilliard dared to be unconventional. But his wide-eyed innocence can be off-putting—you may wonder whether you're dealing with contrived affectation or real idiosyncrasy. While *Tidal Surge* seems genuinely inspired, other pieces are only amusingly clever: *Two Friends*, for instance, reads, "Two friends caught in a blizzard/ Fortunately one was a wizard." Robilliard's friends Gilbert & George wrote a brief, loving tribute to him for the exhibition catalogue, which conveys something of the ingenuous, magnetic character he evidently was. You feel that charisma in the paintings, but you don't sur-

render completely to it because you also sense a certain cool calculation. One of his pictures distills that oxymoronic quality nicely. The text reads, "They've all got butterfly eyes and a will of iron."
—Ken Johnson