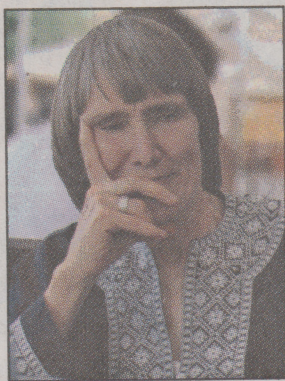


Murder in the Los Angeles art world

"Still Lives" by Maria Hummel Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2018

It's a gala opening night at the Rocque Museum, featuring the first exhibition in 10 years of the avant-garde feminist Kim Lord.

"Still Lives" is a collection of Lord's self-portraits, each dressed and gorily laid out as a famously brutalized and murdered woman. A flamboyant protest against the way violence against women is sensationalized in the media, it's worth millions, promising to attract the wealthiest art patrons in Los Angeles. It doesn't, however, attract Maggie Richter, the composer of catalogs and general editor for the mu-



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

seum, which she enthusiastically calls "my workplace and my university." Recently her lover, Greg Shaw Ferguson, has dumped her for Kim Lord and the ambitious, money-driven art world she inhabits. Maggie has no desire to watch

him escort Lord through the gala, building his reputation as a coming gallery with every handshake. As it turns out, she doesn't need to; Kim Lord misses her press interviews, then the gala itself. Is she grandstanding? Has she been abducted? Or worse?

It's worse. Greg (now known as Shaw in the high echelons of the LA

art world) is accused of Lord's murder, and he begs Maggie to prove him innocent. Aware of the irony of the situation but still unable to shed her feelings for him, Maggie falls back on her earlier experience



as the intern for an investigative journalist in Vermont — an experience, we learn, that contributed to the death of her undisclosed source. Her investigations lead her from the seamy side of LA to the offices of the richest art patrons in the city, and then to a startling conclusion that risks her life.

The mystery moves along with professional speed and competence, admirably supported by Hummel's earlier experience in working for an LA gallery of contemporary art. Readers unfamiliar with this world get a fine introduction to the intersection of art and its patrons, the idea of "provenance," the behind-the-scenes working of cash-strapped museums, and an incidental sampling of the variety of LA's less expensive restaurants. Maggie, originally so deeply horrified by Kim Lord's art that she turns away before seeing the whole

exhibition, overcomes natural jealousy to feel horrified sympathy for Lord's end. She also comes to recognize, slowly, that artists like Lord succeed not because their skill is of the highest order but because they understand the system that supports artistic endeavor.

But such is the well-drawn list of characters in this mystery that Maggie also learns about the dignity of a colleague who has quietly survived abuse, the unexpected compassion of a private investigator hired to expose the art world's corruption, and the value of friendship with a co-worker. Contemporary art forms a vivid background for the plot, but Hummel's understanding of complex human character add depth to this well-crafted and uniformly interesting read.

Laura Stevenson lives in Wilmington and her most recent novels, "Return in Kind" and "Liar from Vermont," are