

"Judith Linhares at Concord Gallery"

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Richard Price - Arts Magazine, June, 1983.

Pictured: "Rescue", 1982, oil on canvas, 42 1/4 inches X 48 5/8 inches.

Judith Linhares grew up in Southern California during the jitterbug, boomtown war years of the early 1940s. The rock in the raging Felliniesque sea of her childhood was her grandmother and a woman who was so kind as to drill into her the Lord's Prayer. Linhares' paintings seem fueled by a lifelong reaction, half panic, half outrage, to the phrase "If I die before I wake."

As the Mexicans celebrate Dia de los Muertos in order to get chatty and casual with the inevitable, Linhares paints her way into familiarity with death: to neutralize the terror, to angle for a stay of execution. One

stares at a Linhares dreamscape with its prone nudes and wonders, "Are they asleep or are they dead?" To lay one's head on a pillow is to flirt with annihilation, to slip into a primal lotusland as old as conscious thought. One is beckoned into a netherworld in which the figures slide, float, rise, sink, and drift somnambulistically across a terrain of snares: webs, pools, caves, hearths, foliage. It is a world filled with dread, but also seductive and hypnotic, becalmed. The terror glides toward your bed like a vampire; the sandman becomes the grim reaper. I've heard that

freezing to death is a relatively painless way to go; all you do is drift off.

Linhares' canvases are universal anthologies of subconscious death images that span and combine time and place from prehistoric cave paintings to Elm Street Halloween. Silhouette-sailors whose body lines suggest hunters found in the caves of Lascaux, or more strongly, Grecian urn warriors, fall from chalky ghost barques into the sea toward monsters of the deep or are cradled in the arms of gigantic women. Skeletons and red devils, the horned and goateed demons of American childhood, lay in

languid embrace with narcotic nudes or give chase to women in vaguely Gypsy-Latin peasant dress of shawls and voluminous skirts. Often, the women clutch necklaces; stolen demon treasures and the tableaux smack of European fairytales.

Foliage is either Mexican (primitive, lush) or Japanese (watercolor, sparse). Also Japanese are the small ice-blue pools of water, festooned with stylized curlicues of motion. Ubiquitous chalky skulls lurk like dissolving dream fragments; black cats arch their backs; forests are filled with menace-glowing cabins which may offer sanctuary for evil spirits. The trees are filled with birds both innocent and sinister in their frozen profusion. All is presented in kaleidoscopic collage: a subconscious crazy-quilt superimposed against divided color fields of glowing heat and icy cold. Shelter tones of yellow-red-orange bordering a land of cadaverous blue are the realm of Pluto and Davy Jones' locker. Although danger lurks everywhere, the contrast implies life and death choices: the Lady or the Tiger.

Many of the physically dominant characters in Linhares' watery tableaux are cyclopean: sea monsters; titanic women with huge oblong heads bowed by their own weight. Smaller women kneel in boats, pouring liquid from amphoras onto the water (gestures of placation or appeasement to the leviathans below).

In Saul Bellows, Henderson the Rain King is propelled from his morbid, suburban existence into a soul-saving, Gulliverian journey to Africa after a visit to an aquarium and an eye-to-eye confrontation with an octopus. Transfixed by the baleful, one-eyed gaze, he realizes that someday he will die. Cyclopean vision is tunnel vision, inescapable and ancient: doom-truth. To Linhares, sleep is a journey into the land of the one-eyed oracle. No one has been able to break the mortality bank to date, but Linhares paints to study the possibilities.

W.C. Fields, on his death bed, was seen thumbing through the Bible; when asked what an avowed atheist was doing pouring over the "Good Book," Fields drawled, "Looking for the loopholes." (Concord, May 6-28)

Richard Price



JUDITH LINHARES

Judith Linhares, Rescue, 1982. Oil on canvas, 42 1/4 x 48 5/8". Courtesy Concord Contemporary Art.