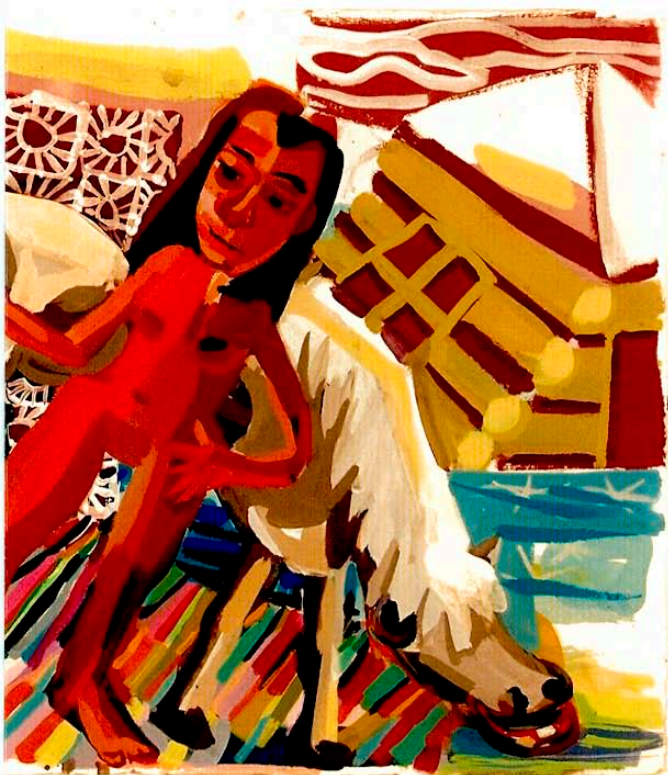


Linhares



Judith Linhares: Divine Intoxication
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"You cannot microwave experience," Ned Colletti said, "the only way to get it is to live it." The Dodger's General Manager was talking about Al LaMacchia, a veteran scout who didn't bother with speed-guns or stopwatches and instead relied on his gut instincts to sniff out prospects whose promise, talent, and dedication were matched by their capacity to make it in the big leagues, year after year after year. Colletti's words in last Tuesday's newspaper serendipitously describe the powers and pleasures of Judith Linhares's paintings on linen and paper, which similarly compress decades of expertise (not to mention discipline and hard work) into split-second decisions the painter regularly makes without much of a fuss, with even less high-tech assistance (nothing but brushes slathered in liquid pigment and dragged across flat surfaces), and, most of all, with the understated aplomb of a master in action, who just happens to be at the top of her game.

At a time when wireless telecommunications have made instantaneous gratification a way of life, and digitally transmitted information has made a joke of patience while diminishing attention spans to frightfully abbreviated durations, it's refreshing to come across Linhares's bold pictures of simple things. Each looks as if it were done in a single, furious session. Yet all of her images make you want to look at them a lot longer than the whiplash, breakneck pace of their making. Most important, each repays repeat viewings, revealing very little in terms of new narrative developments yet drawing viewers into a world unburdened by the plodding regimen of plot, content, and message-oriented meaning. The world Linhares depicts may not be Eden, but it sure beats the Pavlovian mechanics that increasingly define human interaction in the real



world and the knee-jerk reactions to hot-button issues that currently pass for political discourse and take the place of independent thinking.

Linhares's juicy paintings of corny subjects – including clichéd still lifes, silly, children's-book critters, cheesy, cartoon landscapes, and lumpy nudes doing their own thing far from the bright lights of the big city – are also profoundly heartening. The best ones transform incidental details, common scenes, and otherwise forgettable moments into the high points of life – not the earth-shattering stuff of big-budget Hollywood productions, or the life-changing truths painfully wrenched from therapy sessions, or even the subtle little epiphanies favored by literary aficionados and other lovers of poetic metaphors. Instead, the blunt loveliness of simple things takes vivid shape in Linhares's point-blank pictures, which consistently give form to those magical moments when your pulse seems to beat with a rhythm that's in tune with the hum and buzz of its surroundings. The inner world of subjectivity – of dreams, memories, and fantasies – connects with the external world of dirt, plants, and animals, via the rudimentary activities of living (i.e., working, eating, and relaxing) in Linhares's deftly messy images of meaty stick figures cooking, cleaning, and schlepping, like the rest of us, but still finding time to dance around campfires, skinny dip in moonlit lakes, and sunbathe buck naked on rocky outcrops, without a worry in the world.

In terms of art history, Linhares revisits good old fashioned German Expressionism, recuperating its original animal innocence (and playful verve) from the various Neo-Expressionisms that have, over the better part of the last century, added layers of irony, anger, aggression, bombast, and cynicism to the style's carefree simplicity. In the United States, the long shadow of Abstract Expressionism has fallen across the style from which it descended, dumping a truckload of psychological significance shot-through with sexual trauma on first-generation Expressionism, which often had a lot less to do with subjectivity and the blurting out of repressed sentiments than Abstract Expressionism did. To get a picture of where Linhares's paintings are coming from, travel back, in your mind's-eye, to Paula Modersohn-Becker's pictures of hardworking farmers and stoic peasants from the first decade of the twentieth century. Go there by way of Charles Garabedian's paintings of light-hearted fatalists bemused by life's tragicomic absurdities and Mary Heilmann's sensual geometric abstractions, which are at once casually elegant, rough around the edges, tough as nails, and sexy as silk. Or imagine a painting by Matisse if he were not an urbane sophisticate at home on the French Riviera, but a country bumpkin who brought the same elan, confidence, and lifelong dedication to his observations of life in the Northern European countryside. Either exercise will give you a feel for the spirit of Linhares's paintings – for their generosity and nonchalance, their humility and ambition, their selflessness and fearless willingness to stake everything on a fleeting moment, risking embarrassment and more on an experience of the world that cannot be proven or conveyed analytically but must be shared by sympathetic participants.



Dine, 22x30 gouache on paper, 2006

Linhares's paintings have the vivid instantaneousness of dreams, in which you see everything in a split-second, more clearly and starkly than in waking life, when our minds filter and edit, deleting and obscuring incidental, extraneous information so consciousness can survive the overwhelming onslaught of the image-glut of modern life. But the longer you look at an oil or gouache by Linhares, the less unified it seems. In many, foreground and background are discontinuous, and the objects that fill the middle ground are contained by neither. Other images seem to be cobbled together like piecemeal collages or ad hoc adaptations, each part breaking down into more parts – as when a striated sky becomes a luscious stripe painting or a hill tips vertiginously, the field of flowers covering it disintegrating into flashes of brilliant color. Still others have the presence of crazy quilts, with clashing patterns and madcap palettes that create visual pandemonium. Despite violating the rules of perspective, the niceties of composition, and the expectations of good taste, these paintings hold together – loosely, and freely and sometimes, just barely. This give and take – between singular, iconic image and scattershot, freewheeling chaos – endows Linhares's art with moxy and verve. Even better, it acquaints viewers with an animated, ever-changing world, where one small step is all it takes to go from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

-David Pagel

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