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A Venus of Wild Nights: The Female Nude in Paintings by Judith Linhares

A nude woman sits on a pyramidal assemblage of logs in a pose reminiscent of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (1902) in Judith Linhares's painting *Up There* (2003). With a delineated but transparent form, an absurdly large bumblebee feeds on enormous flowers at the base of the structure. The female figure oversees the fantastical scene like a queen bee atop a beehive. Linhares revisits the subject of a monumental female nude in her paintings (a traditional subject in the history of painting), and as such, these "queen bees" populate a whimsical but historical world. Her paintings are large, and even in reproduction, the monumentality of the image is felt. Not only are the subject and size of her paintings significant, but what also matters to the meaning of her work is her own identity as a woman and as a painter. In her evocation of recognizable figures (as in comparison to *The Thinker*), Linhares assertively tackles the history and subject of painting itself in her works. She renders the sky in *Up There* with enormous brushstrokes of blue and white and applies seemingly arbitrary swaths of orange throughout the composition. At once, Linhares manages to merge abstraction and figuration, the recognizable and the uncanny, the historical and the contemporary, the conventional and the avant-garde.

Born in 1940, Linhares came of age in the midst of 1960's and 1970's feminism. Influenced by a radically new analysis of the representation of the female body, Linhares makes paintings that subvert the patriarchal approach to the erotic or fetishized nude found in the history of art. Linhares's work, however, stands apart from feminist artists of her generation, such as Carolee Schneeman, Judy Chicago, and Eleanor Antin. Many of her feminist contemporaries also confronted issues surrounding the female body, but did so through other media—such as performance, installation, and photography—in order to work against art-historical precedents that objectify the female form. In contradistinction, Linhares does not deny the historicity of depicting the female nude and deals directly with the traditional nude female situated in natural landscapes. Regardless of this distinction, Linhares, like her feminist counterparts, effectively challenges the

conventional representations of female bodies as simply sources of titillation and pleasure.

Linhares not only takes on a historically male practice of painting the female model in art but also reclaims the process of painting itself. Her painterly nudes seem in part to be responses to Willem de Kooning's infamously aggressively painted females in his *Woman* series (1952–53). Charged, gestural brushstrokes reveal a struggle between painterliness and heroic modeling in both Linhares's and De Kooning's works. The physicality represented in De Kooning's paintings evokes a sexual violence in the making and modeling of his female forms. Rather than working in anxious opposition to the female body, Linhares asserts the act of painting as one of identification with the subject (rather than of objectification of the female), one that in her words, "often involves my whole body." Linhares engages directly with this corporeality in her painting through her process, her subject, and because of the life-size scale of the figures represented.

The goal of the paintings seems to be not only to reread but also to redo the paintings of great nudes from a feminist perspective. Past female nudes have tended to represent mythical beings and philosophical virtues, but Linhares's paintings suggest an imagined and even poetic narrative. What seems to interest her is the underlying sexuality and eroticism presented under the guise of "Beauty" and "Truth" in the history of painting. Her painting *Picnic* (2007) refers to the Arcadian tradition of female nudes in a pastoral landscape, which traces its lineage back to the High Renaissance. Compared to Titian's *Concert Champêtre* (c. 1510) as well as Edouard Manet's scandalous revision of the subject in *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), *Picnic* borrows the conventional depiction of female nudes in a bucolic setting. In removing the male companions from the scene, Linhares rewrites the story for these idyllic nymphs. With the men gone, the two women hang joyously and comically from the trees. The lavish picnic spread denotes an abundance of nature, but nothing about the painting seems exceptionally "natural" or ordinary. Linhares evokes the myth and the unexpected sight of female nudes in landscapes, but her renderings are more fantastical and bizarre. The large bumblebees reappear (possibly to replace the men who accompany the female figures in Manet and Titian) to feast on or disturb the lavish spread of food. Rather than representing standard picnic fare, a pink, tiered cake and fried eggs in a pan perhaps symbolize constructed notions of femininity. This fanciful landscape provides an alternative, resolutely fecund painterly world for the female subject to inhabit.

Linhares offers another alternate reading of a cultural myth with her painting

Blaze (2003–04). According to Linhares, the girl in the painting expands upon the story of *Snow White*; the painter sees both figures on the cusp of sexual maturity and sensual awareness. Although Linhares identifies the scene in *Blaze* as an “autoerotic moment,” the painting is not simply about presenting eroticism for the viewer’s own voyeuristic pleasure. In comparison to one of the best-known standing female nudes in the history of art, Jean-August-Dominique Ingres’s *Venus Anadyomène* (1848), the nude in *Blaze* resists certain conventions of eroticism and idealized beauty. Her disproportionately large head gazes inward at her compacted body. Elongated arms swing outward and away from her stance; the body parts appear strangely disparate, rather than sensually whole. With a glazed stare, Linhares’s girl gapes awkwardly and almost maniacally at her own nudity. In contrast, Ingres’s *Venus* rests one arm above her head and caresses her hair with each hand and looks sensuously and invitingly out toward the viewer. The girl in *Blaze* does not perform her nudity with the same kind of lascivious theatricality. By enlarging the head, distorting the body, and not hiding her brushstrokes, Linhares renounces the sexuality of *Venus*.

It is not just Linhares’s subject, but also her style that incites comparison to and significant revision of well-known pictorial precedents. Although Linhares has cited James Ensor and Edvard Munch as artistic inspiration, some paintings, particularly *Wild Nights* (2005), approximate the same sense of space, bodily abstraction, and pictorial sophistication presented in Pablo Picasso’s “primitive” visages and Paul Cézanne’s paintings of nude bathers. *Wild Nights* depicts three nude women roasting marshmallows over an alarmingly wide-reaching fire outdoors. While the arrangement of space alludes to Cézanne’s landscapes, the face of the woman at right bears remarkable resemblance to Picasso’s early cubist figures, specifically to *Self-Portrait with a Palette* (1906). In her painting, Linhares adopts the dark, almond-shaped eyes, broad nose, downcast direction of gaze, dark hair, closed mouth, and arched brow that Picasso depicts. As in Picasso’s work, some areas of Linhares’s paintings, especially the thick demarcation of shadow on each figure’s left cheek, are intended to be seen purely as paint rather than as mimetic forms. Similarly, the thick white daubs of paint on the end of the women’s sticks signify both marshmallows and the tacky property of paint itself. In homage to Picasso’s cubist innovations, the brushstrokes of Linhares’s compositions ambiguously denote both the three-dimensionality of form and space and the two-dimensionality of the surface. Linhares repaints Picasso through her own perspective as a female, perhaps as her own type of self-portrait. Holding a palette, but missing his paintbrush, Picasso paints himself in the act of painting.

The sticks with their painterly clots then stand in for Picasso's absent brush. Because they hold the sticks, Linhares grants the women the status of maker, rather than merely that of a passive and purely sexual model.

While Linhares inarguably engages with the history of painting in her work, it should not go without mention that she also refers to a history of poetry. Linhares takes her title *Wild Nights* from a poem by Emily Dickinson. Just as one usually equates a female nude with sensuality, readers have been tempted to read Dickinson's "Wild Nights—Wild Nights!" erotically. This comparison underscores the notion that Linhares's nudes, like Dickinson's poem, are not straightforwardly sexual. Dickinson does not make clear whether or not the speaker longs for wild nights of passion or seeks idyllic shelter from threatening tempestuousness. Similarly, Linhares's figures are sometimes wild and filled with a kind of unbridled sexuality, yet resistant to the conventional sexual ploys desired and expected from a female body. Her Venuses are at once crude and mythical, immodestly wanton and obliviously naive. The significance of Linhares's monumental paintings is her ability to be ambiguous but not ambivalent. She is critical of the past but carries forward the grand, monumental traditions of the history of painting.