

JUDITH LINHARES: RIPTIDE

Riptide - to say the word aloud is to conjure up feelings of danger and mystery, of death and also survival.

It is also the title of Judith Linhares current show of oils and gouache, her twenty-sixth solo exhibition. As has been the case for a number of years, her current paintings are large, bright, colorful and juicy. Women, and sometimes men, cavort in nature, often naked, but always, always unabashedly. It is not unusual to see a massive bonfire blazing, but whether the figures started it or have merely been drawn to it, moth like, is an open question. The atmosphere is palpably warm. On rare occasion a rudimentary shelter might appear in the background, but the landscape occupied by these revelers is as undomesticated as the feral animals that stare blankly at us, attempting to lock our gaze.

Nothing appears fully solid; figures flow into trees, while land, sky, and sea hold their identity with only wavering determination. We cannot mistake the feeling that, should we look away for but a moment, it could all melt away. Linhares' brushwork plays no small role in creating this tremulous universe. Strokes are applied broadly and with verve, the artist's gestures loading up each mark with potential energy. Figures, objects, and the air around them are as much carved as painted onto the canvas, yet the results are anything but crude. Indeed, one of the lingering impressions one is apt to take away from viewing any of the works is the degree of nuance achieved with each line; art brut meets skilled draughtswoman. This is visible throughout, but most easily recognizable where intelligence and emotion are most clearly transmitted: in the eyes and hands of each figure. In stark contrast to the often-hollow stare of the animals, Linhares' human actors reveal heightened states of emotion – lust, longing or, most often, bliss. None of this would be possible without the armature of ultra-precise drawing buried inside each muscular stroke.

All of which might convey an impression of machismo if not filtered and softened through the singular prism of Linhares' colors. A spectrum unique to this artist's palette - her flush pinks, verdant greens, creamy yellows, and velveteen blues all leaning, somehow, towards ultraviolet – it stands not wholly outside our daily experience, but somehow parallel to it. That there is a charged intensity to the hues, an unworldly radiance, is obvious at first glance. It is the secondary, if inescapable, impressions that are harder to define. Not

exactly dissonant, these colors emit a low vibration; we receive them not just optically it would seem, but somehow in sub-dermal ways as well. What is more, because there is an in-between note in each tonal shift, so to speak, we sense something more; we sense time is passing. Indeed, for those who have experienced a certain time and place, there is a post-hallucinatory, back-end of the trip quality in Linhares' nearly over-ripe colors.

And yet as fantastic as Linhares' pastoral idylls appear, there is also a specificity of place and familiarity that is undeniable in them. It is certainly not the lower Manhattan where she lives today, or even the upstate farmhouse where she spends her summers. No, these untamed landscapes and fathomless bodies of water contain a raw beauty much more reminiscent of the place where the artist's family settled more than 100 years ago, and where Linhares was born and raised: California. Which makes sense on many levels, for what other real place encapsulates so many of our dreams and aspirations. What other place continues to evolve and mutate before our eyes, eternally shifting between Eden Reclaimed and Paradise Lost. Even if Linhares was not the true Californian she is, what better vista to conjure than its teeming waters and arid peaks?

There is meaning, too, to be found in awareness that a real place is buried within these febrile invocations. It is a signpost reminding us that behind the fantastic inventiveness of the scenes before us, there is a real investigation of the world, our world, happening. That Linhares' polychrome nymphs and satyrs, sirens and sea sprites are engaged in more than a bacchanal escape, they are seeking something pure and true about who we were, who we are, or who we want to be. We have to dare to follow these muses into the warm waters of memory and dreams, knowing that it is okay to be swept away, to be pulled out to sea, to be captured in Linhares' riptide.

[Deven Golden, 2011](#)