

Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

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Linda Stojak

Stephen Haller Gallery through April 28
BY DOUGLAS F. MAXWELL

I PURCHASED A SMALL PAINTING by Linda Stojak a few years ago, and in 1993, I included Stojak in an exhibition I curated about painting at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art titled *Timely and Timeless*. In the Aldrich catalogue I wrote: "In art, the price we pay for the instant gratification of the socio-political message is that we lose one of the great satisfactions in appreciating a creative work — that is meaning and beauty is revealed over a period of time. There is little more gratifying in art than returning to a painting time and again to discover some previously hidden elements which further elucidate its metaphorical quality."

I felt that about Stojak's painting then and I believe it even more strongly in her present work. In *Timely and Timeless* I paired Stojak's work with that of Susan Rothenberg, and found that both have a marvelously fluid painterly style and personally idiosyncratic way of forming images. But whereas Rothenberg employs metaphors of the horse to address issues of the female self, Stojak has pursued her inquiry of the self through the imagery of the body.

In the past, I have interpreted Stojak's figures as expressing a spiritual dilemma between her Catholic

upbringing and her needs and desires as a woman. In this context, her figures took on a martyred quality which was emphasized by the way the paint of the figure literally dissolved into the background. Her figures have always seemed to hover in space, but now they seem to float in a euphoric space which no longer speaks of suffering, but rather of bliss and ecstasy.

In her last body of work, she seemed preoccupied with images of potential motherhood, and the figures had a kind of edginess to them as she inferred that her biological clock was running amok. The fact that in the press materials for present exhibition she shares her satisfaction with having recently adopted a child is significant, but largely as an introduction to explaining the mood or tonality of these new paintings.

Two of the works (all are *UNTITLED*), one a red figure on a pink/orange ground and the other a blue on blue, are at first glance reminiscent of religious paintings of the martyrdom of St. Peter, figures turned upside down; but on further reflection, I realized these figures were soaring. The red figure's face is surrounded by lips (kisses), themselves a distinct subject in Stojak's paintings in the last year, and I immediately associated to the blissful

kisses between mother and child or between dream-filled lovers.

The blue figure is so ethereal and subtle and the blue so powdery and wispy that I imagined her achieving a flotation in the sublime. Stojak's brush work is soft; it matches her atmospheric color choice, and together they create a tingling sensation of light that fits the mood to a tee. The diagonal placement of the figures not only fosters the illusion of their floating in space, but also acts as a compositional foil to the rectilinearity of the canvas.

In the Baroque period, Rubens and Caravaggio used the placement of surfaces of these canvases. This makes them much more rewarding over time as a second, third or even fourth look gives rise to more meaning and depth. Her choice of blue or pink/red (rose) indicate how colors as symbols are not limited to one particular interpretation.

Picasso's blue and rose were sad and melancholy; Stojak's are blissful and serene. Of course this also lets us know how close in range these emotions can be and how fragile the nature of our self really is as we traverse all of life's experiences. Mine, for one, is enhanced by often returning to look at Stojak's paintings which are full of surprise and wonderment.