

Painting in the Subjunctive Mode: Inez Storer and the Art of Possibilities

by Andrea Pappas

Theatrical Realism: The Art of Inez Storer

...A bridge between what is and what might be...

Inez Storer delivers heavy messages with a light hand. Clothing the profound in blithe garments, she contributes to a tradition shared with many other artists on the West Coast. Consonant with that California tradition, her artistic enterprise both joins with the mainstream of contemporary American art centered in New York and emphatically departs from it. While to the casual observer, Storer's work seems all beautiful surfaces, a closer look reveals her to be, in fact, deeply engaged with the world and the social issues of her time. Like that of her compatriots in New York, Storer's art responds to the social changes wrought by feminism, the fall of the Soviet Union, and postmodernism's acute consciousness of the historicity of the cultural structures within which we live and work. At the same time though, Storer's painterly images depart from the conventions of the New York art world in their personal import and in their reliance on narrative strategies. Her project also differs from that of many of her East Coast contemporaries by virtue of her sustained engagement with difficult and ultimately unanswerable questions about the human condition. Storer's work is rich and multilayered, yielding sustained and satisfying pleasures -- intellectual and spiritual as well as visual -- for the engaged reader.

Storer's work is strongly figurative, and has been for more than 40 years. For most of this period she has also employed a collage of assemblage method in her paintings. She deploys bits and pieces of the real world -- fabric, letters, pictures, book pages, small toys, ribbons, and all the little cast-offs of our lives -- across the surfaces of her work. The human image always implies a narrative, even if only between the image and the viewer. Artifacts of human lives carry their own implied narratives and histories, what Ed Kienholz called "little tragedies," deepening and complicating the narratives initially suggested by Storer's figurative elements. Thus the reception of Storer's work has hinged, in part, on the status of narrative in the art world's value system.

During the 1950s, the tenants of abstract expressionism all but banished figure and narrative from painting. Yet for Storer, the human figure -- and hence narrative -- played an important role in her work even when her paintings were seemingly abstract. When discussing her abstract expressionist work of the 1950s, she remarked, "I was often sneaking in the figure." An untitled work from 1957 features rectangular forms constructed from slashing strokes of paint. Almost entirely abstract, the work nevertheless has a strong ground plane and a single vertical element dominates the canvas. This vertical form, contrasted with the horizontal elements at its feet, is figurative, albeit barely so. The overall field of the canvas is washed in bluish-gray watery tones, while short, vertical, black spikes spread out in the center section of the canvas. The entire arrangement suggests a decaying dock in a body of water. The dominant "figure" stands just to the left of center and is flanked by two slim elements with flat-like forms near their tops, again suggesting piers. In this painting it is easy to see a major theme of Storer's later work: the single figure which floats or has only a tenuous connection to the ground and the water or ectoplasmic fields enveloping it. This tension between figure and ground resisted revolution within contemporary frameworks, requiring viewers -- and the artist -- to seek new possibilities, new paradigms to create meaning.

This quasi-figurative imagery puts Storer's early career squarely in the second generation of abstract expressionists; artists engaged in extending and refining the new visual vocabulary developed in the later 1940s and early 1950s by their predecessors on both coasts. California artists, such as Storer and the group that would come to be known as the Bay Area figurative artists, were not alone in this endeavor -- it was equally a part of the New York art scene. In general, the first generation had purged their abstract work of references to the visible world, particularly the figure and the landscape. Although Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock returned to the figure in the 1950s, and some artists outside the core group of New York abstract expressionists had never abandoned it (Larry Rivers, for example), it was largely the second generation who performed the important work of integrating the new painterly abstract vocabulary with the traditions of western art. Storer's subtle but persistent insinuation of the figure clearly marks her as one of the members of this second generation.