

M+B

HYPERALLERGIC

Upending Conventions with Figurative Painting

July 22, 2018

By John Yau

For years, the phrase “small colonies of the saved” has called out to me to be used. It is from the poem, “Those Being Eaten by America,” by Robert Bly. I have never cited Bly in something I have written until now, but this fragment of a line from a not particularly interesting poem seemed more resonant than usual when it rose to the surface of my consciousness.

It all started when I passed Alexi Worth on 30th Street between 7th and 8th Avenue. We were both out of our neighborhoods so to speak, which is to say in Chelsea, where we have seen each other while going to galleries. Passing, saying hello, I knew that we would meet again somewhere in his past and in my future. My hunch was based on the fact that I was going to see the two-person exhibition of Angela Dufresne and Louis Fratino, titled *Glazed*, at Monya Rowe.



Angela Dufresne, *70's Mom* (2017), oil on canvas, 20 x 19.5 inches

Rowe is one of the gallerists that you especially root for in these crazily seismic times. She has given many artists their first solo show — Larissa Bates, Angela Dufresne, and Josephine Halvorson, among them. Opening in 2003, her first space in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn was 200 square feet. She has also had galleries in Chelsea and on the Lower East Side. Two years ago, she moved from New York to Saint Augustine, Florida. Recently, she moved back to a tenth floor space in a building that has no other galleries on a street just far enough away from Chelsea’s gallery district that people would have know about it to go there. They should, because Rowe discovers artists, which many better known galleries have never done.

Writing about Dufresne on a previous occasion, I stated that she was part of a group of figurative artists:

[...]they seem to have their fingers on the pulse of the cataclysmic changes America has been undergoing, as signaled by [Eve Kosofsky] Sedgwick’s foundational book [*Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)], which helped begin the field of queer studies. Sedgwick was one of the first to advance that it was limiting to define sexuality in the binary opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Whether or not this is the future of figurative painting seems beside the point since it is the future of America, whatever conservatives in the red states think. Flying a defaced American flag in Kansas, as

M+B

Josephine Meckseper recently did at the University of Kansas's Spencer Art Museum, is the latest in series of tired privileged gestures where nothing is ventured and a lot of attention is gained.

The work of Dufresne and Fratino is far more radical than anything than Meckseper has gotten attention for — something a large swath of the art world seems unable to wrap its head around: painting can be radical; conceptual art can be a boring, tiresome rehash. Meckseper's flag isn't David Hammons "African-American Flag" (1990) or the Rainbow Flag, which every museum ought to fly just to set the record straight.

Dufresne has a big spirit. In the painting "Just My Type" (2018), she has laid down a washy, abstract ground of blues, turquoises, pinks and reds and outlined two women over it. One woman is holding her arms out, turning in her claw-like hands like she is about grab or catch something, while the other woman is standing behind her, looking over her shoulder. This second figure has one arm around the waist of the first figure and is holding their erect penis.

Dufresne's painting — particularly her use of color, abstraction, and line — shares something with Raoul Dufy, who is said to have never painted a sad picture. The difference is that Dufresne is cruder and jauntier than Dufy ever was. In "70's Mom" (2017), she presents a close-up view of a mother wearing a necktie, holding a baby on her lap and smoking a cigarette. The view is cropped so that we see only the baby's face looking up at us, one hand reaching towards its mouth. For unknown reasons, the mother's other arm is raised in the air, suggesting that she isn't grasping the baby.

Without making a fuss about it, Dufresne undoes all the conventions we associate with paintings of mothers and their child, starting with Mary and the infant Jesus. Remember all of Pablo Picasso's saccharine depictions of a mother holding her child, from "Mother and Child in front of a Vase of Flowers" (1901) to "Mother and Child" (1965), and you get a sense of just how tough, interesting, smart, and funny Dufresne can be.

Louis Fratino also undoes Picasso. In "Reconfiguration" (2018), he uses oil, crayon, and oil stick to depict two young men making love. Tightly pressing their faces together until they become one shape, their kiss knowingly reinhabits Picasso paintings such as "The Kiss" (1969) as well as reimagines Dora Maar's famous profile. In "Waking Up" (2018), a young man is lying in bed. Frantino uses pink and mauve crayon to give his skin a waxy glow.

Alongside Dufresne's joyful challenges, Frantino's celebration of male love and domesticity, as well as his imaginative transformations of motifs found in Picasso, suggests a shift has taken place in the art world: the age of derision, caricature, and imitation has lost whatever edge it once supposedly had. Once seen as radical, the work of many celebrated artists of the early 2000's seems increasingly conventional.

The subjects that Dufresne and Fratino deal with are not new. They date back at least as far as the Classical era, as evidenced in Greek literature and mythology. In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles and Patroclus share the same bed; Plato called Sappho "the tenth muse." Cy Twombly explored these subjects in his art. And yet, it remains a side of history and culture that is seldom acknowledged by mainstream institutions. It is time they did.

Signing the guest book, and seeing Worth's name just above mine, Bly's line came to mind. I wondered if "small colonies of the saved" applied to the supporters, friends, and fans of Dufresne and Fratino or to those offended by Meckseper's wan gesture. I don't think the storms gathering on the horizon will clarify the answer.