

## Faceless encounters: The paintings of Linda Stojak

Michael Abatemarco Mar 10, 2017 Updated Mar 16, 2017



Linda Stojak: *Figure 90*, 2015, oil and mixed media on canvas



Linda Stojak: *Untitled II*, 2016, oil and mixed media on canvas

“Oddly romantic” is how art critic Edward Leffingwell described the paintings of Philadelphia-based artist Linda Stojak in the May 2006 issue of *Art in America*, which is quoted on a gallery wall in her first exhibition at LewAllen Galleries. The works do recall a romantic past, not in any nostalgic way, but in a knowing way, as through a filter of time — though it might be more accurate, in terms of Stojak’s painting style, to say layers of time. The nine paintings on exhibit are enigmatic renderings of women, lushly executed and textured by building up the paint.

The subjects in some of her works seem plucked from the canvases of a bygone era. The figures may put you in mind of 19th-century portraiture — paintings by artists such as John Singer Sargent — and the clothing some of Stojak's figures wear harks back to Victorian times. Compare Sargent's work to Stojak's and you'll see some similar aspects, including the use of stark color contrasts and formal compositional qualities, such as a figure's pose.

But while Sargent painted a number of portraits of members of high society, they were identifiable subjects. Stojak's figures are not — their features are indeterminate, and the faces are almost entirely featureless. In several paintings, the women are partially rendered in outline, and little besides the line designating the figures separates them from the background. Some wear hoop skirts that wouldn't have been out of place in Sargent's time. One can think of this shape as formed by a metal cage — which seems pertinent to Stojak's feminist subject matter. The clothing in her works sometimes indicates that these figures belong to a world of privilege, but as women they are united by something that cuts across matters of class: They are all silent and without faces, which might be another way of saying that they all have the same face or fate.

Traces of blood red, as in an untitled painting from 2015, suggest violence and appear in several other compositions. The figure in the untitled painting is turned slightly from the viewer, self-protectively. The red is used to partially outline the form, but it also gathers in a deep blood-red splotch at her back like an open wound. The woman's anonymity marks her as everyone and no one. Even if these paintings are regarded as self-portraiture of a sort, giving voice to the interior, sublimated archetypes of the psyche, the pain and sorrow with which Stojak invests them isn't personalized but generalized across the body of work.

Stojak uses a red line in dramatic fashion in 2012's *Figure 73*, which shows two women standing side by side against a stark white background. The one on the left, her figure traced in a subdued grayish blue, is barely there. The bold use of the red line, zig-zagging over her body, suggests that she is bound by it, as though by a rope. The form of the slightly smaller figure on her right (the figures could be mother and daughter, but nothing overtly indicates that) is also partially delineated by red. The

painting may deal in some regard with the issue of domestic violence and generational cycles of abuse, but one should be wary of reading too much into the work. Stojak avoids the trappings of allusions to specific people or places, which could give her paintings a narrow frame of reference. Her subject matter feels nonspecific and universal.

Stojak's works can be seen as commentary on paintings under the jurisdiction of the male gaze (Sargent's *Madame X* comes to mind), in which the female form is objectified and sexualized. In Stojak's paintings, identity is obliterated. There is a single nude among this small presentation of large-scale works, called *Untitled (LS07-267)*, from 2007. The painting's subject is prostrate, a pale white figure against black, but there is no trace of eroticism in this nude. The painting frustrates the viewer who's seeking more information or a narrative. Is the woman dead? Is she sleeping? Is her voice still because she has been silenced? Stojak's figures exist somewhere between the somatic realm of the corporeal and the elusive, ethereal worlds of time and memory, where names and histories dissipate and where faces grow vague and indistinct.

According to the gallery, Stojak is not a prolific artist — *Silent Voices* is the culmination of years of work. She paints with a palette knife, adding layers, scraping away, and adding more. Hers are labored works but don't appear as such. Stojak's use of paint provides a textured but uniform surface where close inspection reveals numerous colors, even in the backgrounds, which from a distance read as more solid black or white — or in the case of *Figure 72*, from 2012, light blue. Her subjects, traced in paint, recall a statement from the Ashcan School's John Sloan, that "painting is drawing, with the additional means of color." The drawing/painting dynamic is one of *Silent Voices'* many contradictions, not the least of which is captured in its title. But these silent voices say a lot.

***Linda Stojak: Silent Voices; through March 26***

LewAllen Galleries, 1613 Paseo de Peralta, 303-988-3250