

Linda Stojak: Look Away

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Linda Stojak is regarded for her highly nuanced and evocative portrayal of the human figure, sensitizing viewers to the indelible aura of the feminine spirit. Stojak's mesmerizing, unforgettable images possess a quality of ambiguity that invites deep reflection on the figures she depicts: Who are they? What do they wish to say? Her paintings unfold their mysteries patiently and quietly, communicating nonverbally, like expressions of the artist's subconscious and accessible perhaps most readily by feeling and intuition. In so doing, her works suggest a variety of complicated inner realities or tensions that lie just beneath the surface, given breath and body by Stojak through paint.

Stojak's spectral paintings may be seen as inquiries into materiality and presence, both physical and symbolic. Though her paintings have been described as "psychological self-portraits, they remain in possession of a resonance that is broadly universal, a quality evoked through minimal, anonymous figuration and elemental atmospheres that are neither conditional nor specific. In their expressive, painterly openness and aching emotional charge, they offer and invite empathy and fellowship.

Though Stojak makes her work without espousing explicit ideological polemic, the figures in her paintings invite serious contemplation of their possible conceptual significance. They possess a sense of resolute and enduring presence even as their initial appearance is enigmatic. These figures can stand as powerful, if subtle, symbols of permanence immune from erasure. Inevitably, they also reflect the synthesis of emotions, fears, conflicts, doubts, and experiences that comprise the human condition. In the ambiguous but resolute stance of these works, Stojak searches for meaning, discovery, liberation, reinvention and clarity. Above all, Stojak's works possess a strength in vulnerability, and an immutability of the feminine spirit from within that endures despite adversity.

Suspended at times in enveloping shadows or in ethereal brightness, these haunting feminine figures are removed from time altogether, like ghost images of real life. They appear alternately tense, airborne, or held by gravity, tethered perhaps by an inner force or feeling. Rather than rooting her canvases in sharpness and detail, Stojak condenses her figures into the most essential lines and suggestions of volume and form. Sometimes they recede into a smoky, sensuous sfumato; others are grounded in thick, lugubrious dark outlines that link firmly with the surface of the painting. With a steadfast command of her materials, Stojak conjures an incredible array of sensations and impressions with the most minimal means. She has a distinctive ability to provoke, to surprise, and above all, to press us to hold our gaze.

Despite their subtle, spectral appearance, Stojak's figures are conveyed through a paint application that is intensely physical: a dichotomy that calls our attention to both the material ephemerality of the body and the multilayered, indefinable nature of human emotions. Like totems of an inner self, her figures are rendered at life-scale, evoking the impression of a mirror that reflects what might typically be concealed within the body, mind, and heart. This mysterious interaction with the viewer signifies the disclosure of a vulnerable self and of an impulse to connect; as icons of personhood, they evoke that which is immutable about the human spirit.

Stojak's painterly associations to the body also reach past the literal: her surfaces are textured carefully in a manner that recalls both skin and an implicit history of touch. "Linda Stojak delights in the materiality of the oil," writes art critic Michaël Amy, "a fluid medium allowing her to conjure

bodies flipping back and forth between paint and the illusion of almost intangible flesh." Though she often works in black and white, Stojak's careful use of high-keyed color is dramatic in its restraint: reds jolting out from black and gray, or gentle, dreamlike environments of blue. At times, her works build into crescendos of glowing, unexpected color: majestically patterned culminations of beauty both extraordinary and unusual. In moments like these, the figure comes into focus in a manner that communicates an aura of both celebration and power. Without fixed identities, they read less as individuals but instead as timeless specters of femininity. They are neither someone nor everyone; they might, however, be anyone.

Other works have figures that are completely faceless, or with facial expressions that have been wiped away, creating a tension between what is shown and what may be concealed. Without faces or facial expressions, and in tenuous grasp of their own solidity, they communicate an exploration of a variety of conflicting impulses or psychological states that offer comfort in the wake of their ambiguity and vulnerability. Stojak says, "My hope is for my work to help people accept the emotions in themselves."

Stojak's figures are solitary, alone, but not lonely. They project interior worlds made visible, inviting viewers to enter into mutual disclosure. About her work, Stojak says: "My paintings are about being born, separation, touching, breathing, dying, loss, time, silence, waiting. I want to keep images suggestively simple I emphasize their emotional complexity through the painting process itself. I want to convey an underlying tension by combining a static, restrained image with a layered, expressive surface. I want to describe and evoke the anxiety that inevitably exists in living."

Stojak is known for deeply engaging with her art, obsessively working and reworking her canvases, adding and removing, a process that leads to a very small number of new paintings each year. Close observation of her surfaces discloses this impulse, revealing an incredible range of tonality and finely graded hue. The Feminist Art Project noted, "Her sensually gestural technique creates a surface that is at once velvet and stone, a translation of portraiture into conceptual expressions of form." Over the course of her thirty-year career, Linda Stojak has been recognized by award of the coveted Guggenheim Fellowship and numerous favorable reviews in leading publications such as The New York Times, ARTFORUM and Art in America.

Edward Leffingwell of Art in America wrote of her work, "There is something hard-won about these anxiously drawn, oddly romantic figures that in their tense grace recall the drawings of Giacometti and Rothenburg." One may notice that a number of these works take as subject the figure of a child. In the past, Stojak would often use her daughter as a model—seated, standing, playing dead, or even posed as the artist herself would pose for inspiration in her painting. Here, these figures are conveyed with greater facial detail and expression than other works in the exhibition. These paintings also hold within them reflections of the creator, the artist, and the mother, identities that all exist side-by-side the subject on the canvas. Like snapshots of something both fleeting and perhaps a little sacred, Stojak conveys moments that have been crystallized from a greater collection of moments into arresting impressions of childhood and motherhood, as reflected within each other and through the act of creation.

Diaphanous in form, but bold in their impression, Stojak communicates the indelible, indomitable aura of the feminine presence. Her otherworldly atmospheres permeate the canvases, surrounding her feminine forms in a consuming, dreamlike mist, yet they feel accessible and knowable if we spend the time looking and seeing. The paintings included in Look Away are more buoyant and hold within them a greater feeling of comfort and presence than ever before. Rendering her figures loosely and with masterful command of her materials and subject, Stojak continues to mesmerize.