

ARTFORUM

Rosa Loy

PIPPY HOULDSWORTH GALLERY



Rosa Loy, *Balance*, 2011, colored pencil, pencil, and watercolor on paper, 12 1/4 x 9".

About a decade ago, a German painter of my acquaintance explained the difference, as he saw it, between himself and the then newly fashionable painters from the former East Germany. “Their work is based on what they know about painting,” he told me. “Our work is based on what we don’t know.” His quietly dismissive comment was clear enough: The Easterners—mainly the painters of the so-called New Leipzig School—were too enamored of tradition, insufficiently exploratory. Among those often cited as members of the Leipzig School is Rosa Loy; whether or not my friend’s strictures hold against the others, I don’t think his diagnosis can be true of her. Maybe because she didn’t originally train as a painter—Loy studied horticulture, of all things, in Berlin and, later, graphic and book arts in Leipzig—she approaches tradition with a fresh, quizzical, sometimes mocking eye. Yet tradition is what she approaches, and her most evident affinities seem to be with precursors such as Balthus or Paula Rego, artists at a distinct tangent to modernism. Like Nancy Spero or Cindy Sherman, however, she’s made women the nearly exclusive subjects of her work—very occasionally she includes a figure of indeterminate sex.

Loy’s recent exhibition “*Tautropfen*” (Dewdrops) included just three canvases along with twenty-one works on paper, all dating from between 2009 and 2012. The paintings alone might tend to suggest that Loy is above all an inventor of seductively enigmatic imagery, one of those artists who conjure potential narratives while carefully keeping them sufficiently open-ended to allow any interested viewer to decide on his or her own. The drawings offer greater scope for the artist’s pictorial imagination, making it even clearer that Loy is not just an imagemaker but a painter in the fullest sense: You are

likely to admire their formal characteristics—line, color, touch, composition—before entering the game of subject matter. Of course, you do find yourself in the game before you know it. But the metamorphic energy of lines, shapes, and colors makes the game one that can't be settled, as exemplified in *Traumfänger* (Dream Catcher), 2011, in which green shapes that swim around an embracing couple (a woman and a more androgynous figure) may alternately seem to be leaves, fish, or sperm. Allegorize at your own risk.

In *Balance*, 2011, a woman sits in a wheelbarrow, cradling a house in her lap—or maybe the house is really inside her; one catches an echo of Louise Bourgeois's various *Femme Maison* images. A second woman approaches her from behind—one might think to push the wheelbarrow along, but no; she merely seems to be reaching out to touch the first woman's head with a single finger, as though trying to determine whether she's real or not. A female doubting Thomas, she is perhaps exercising the "profound skepticism" that the viewer who knows Loy's work best, her husband, Neo Rauch, has ascribed to the artist herself. The image helps give a name to this experience, but what communicates it is not so much the image as such but the artist's ability to make the image balance, as the title would have it, on the single line that is this questioning finger. There's a sly smile that plays across the faces of Loy's protagonists. I can't help but imagine that smile as the artist's own. It says that if she makes her work out of what she knows about painting, that's possible because she knows its illusions and may be charmed by them,

—Barry Schwabsky