

ArtSeen

*9 Wege*

Rosa Loy

David Zwirner June 27-July 28, 2006

SEPT 2006

By James Kalm



Imagine one of Balthus's pubescent models running away from the chateau, joining a band of gypsies or a bizarre cult of female smugglers, and ending up in a university town behind the Iron Curtain. Later, she begins to paint, inspired by the dreamlike experiences of her exotic life. And, to complicate matters further, there's a mysterious twin sister who may or may not be real but who still holds influence over the complex comings and goings of these painted narrative tableaux. While, to my knowledge, none of this ever happened to Rosa Loy (although she did attend the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, the legendarily liberal East German city, where she later became one of the few women painters associated with that boys' club marketed as the "Leipzig Schule"), her paintings do invite overwrought interpretations to explicate their oblique happenings.

In "Disorientierung" (2006), Loy depicts a chilly, moonlit landscape in which two ash-blond women, mirror images of each other, struggle with a long, thick, entangling crimson vine. Dressed in contemporary jeans, boots and winter coat, the figure on the left appears in control of the tussle, with both hands pulling on the single vine that loops around her waist. The woman on the right, wearing what appears to be white medieval pantaloons, is enwrapped in several maroon coils that lift her off the ground. Perhaps this isn't a fight between twins but a rescue attempt, the sister of the world saving the sister of fantasy from the grasping tentacle of reality.

Beyond this struggle-filled narrative, there is another battle waged here between the artist's need to render a figure precisely, to model form and to depict a traditional sense of depth, and her desire to sprint past the fill-in phase of the painting in order to concentrate on the visual focal points of her complex compositions. Loy, like Balthus's late works, utilizes casein, a water-based binder with a short drying time, which requires her to work fast and make decisions on the run, so to speak. As with watercolor, the image's highlights seem to be the white of bare canvas, with shadows built up by overlaying glazes of pigment. This classic technique provides a vantage point into the painterly process, which, in Loy's case, is a precarious balance between fresh, spontaneous paint handling and a perfunctory casualness that leaves one with a sense of raw uneasiness. Any kind of overworking deadens the surface and reduces the colors to milky mush.

Loy populates her narratives almost exclusively with women engaged in indecipherable activities. "Exorzismus" (2006), depicts a boxing match in which the combatants wear color-coordinated gloves and miniskirts, while the image of a female archer hovers behind them as if projected on the wall. In "Mitgefühl" (2006), a magisterial redhead holding a crystal scepter kneels beside a reclining girl, as if ministering to her. In "Träumen" (2006), two young women wander through a dreamlike landscape amid lush hedges of tropically hued foliage. Loy's color sense is often split between translucent scrimms of neutral or pale pastel tones and slabs of saturated synthetic hues dense enough to induce claustrophobia, as with the tangle of eels in the phthalo-green-keyed "Orientierung" (2005). The eels float up a bedroom wall like freeform calligraphy, their sickly cast exacerbating a creepy dreadfulness as the attending women wrangle their slippery prey with gray-green stained hands. In "Septemberglocken" (2006) two

women stride up a muddy umber road accompanied by a pair of triangular cobalt blue shadows so opaque they could be ridden like skateboards.

While many critics have noted the influence of not only Balthus and Giotto but also Neo Rauch, Loy's husband, on the artist, I also see strong parallels with the enigmatic films of David Lynch and the classically inspired paintings of Hans von Marées (1837-1887). Like Lynch, Loy cobbles together pictures from disparate pictorial sources, twisting slightly the accepted meanings of symbols and signs to fit a new storyline. And, as in Lynch's Mulholland Dr., Loy wrests her potential shocks from the split between the fantastical and the real-world personas of contemporary women. Loy's struggle to unite a venerable figurative tradition within a modern painting criterion and her placement of frontally lighted, stylized figures within a shallow space or landscape lend her pictures a mythical northern chill that echoes the heroic late works of her fellow German, Marées.

The hype surrounding the "Leipzig Schule," perhaps reflecting the neo-conservative tendencies within the academy, has focused mainly on the male members. Loy has sidestepped the clichéd sensationalism and swaggering bravura of the "bad boys"; and, by offering a more authentic, less bombastic vision to the movement she has widened its appeal. Leipzig should be glad.