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Mara de Luca at Luis De Jesus

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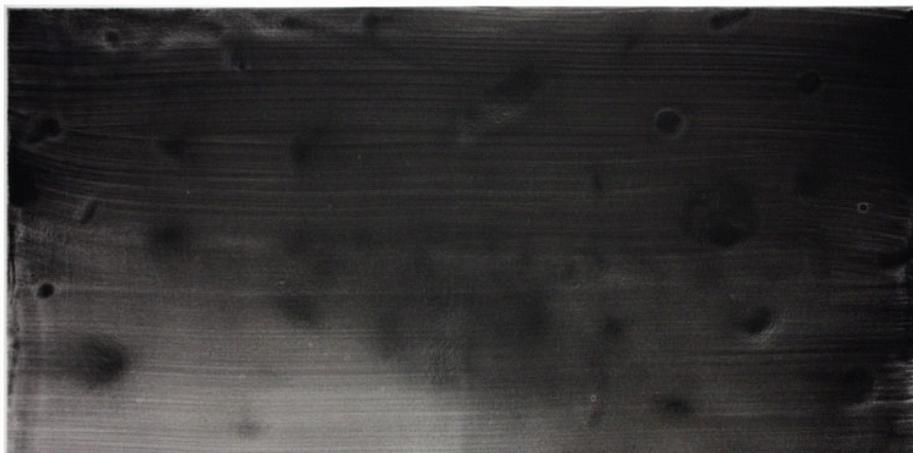


Mara de Luca, Albertine, acrylic painting on silk and canvas, 72 x 108 inches, courtesy Luis De Jesus gallery, Culver City [Los Angeles]

Society805 artist-of-the-month, Mara de Luca comes off a strong solo show at **Luis De Jesus Gallery** in Culver City, which was extended to 3 December. The show offers large, beautifully nuanced, drip-field paintings based on the dusk and night-time experience of the hills and skies of Los Angeles.

This is a significant exhibition, visually striking and well-considered.

De Luca talks of her current interest in how the lights on the hills above Los Angeles blend with the stars at dusk and into the night. This motif dominates the show, but one of the many strengths of this show is in how well these images work, not just as representations of Los Angeles, but as large abstractions that transparently reveal the artifice of their representation. They completely work for someone who has never experienced Los Angeles, thus revealing a refreshing universality of visual experience.



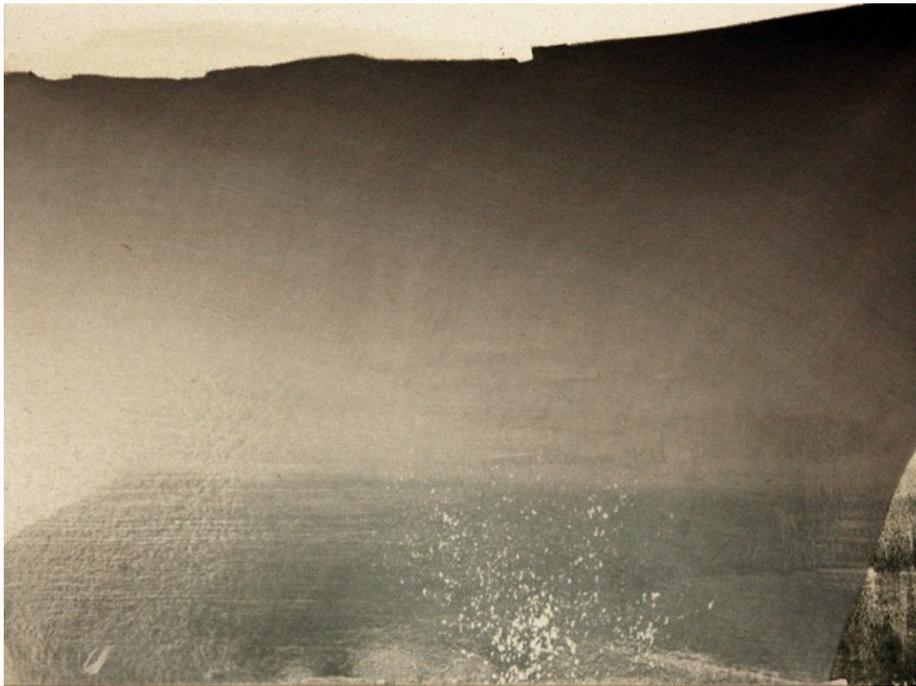


Mara de Luca, Bethenny, acrylic painting on silk and canvas, 62 x 96 inches, courtesy Luis De Jesus gallery, Culver City [Los Angeles]

They are, first and foremost deftly nuanced works by a painter who understands painting and has a keen appreciation for its history, and is not afraid to take a stand for painting as a contemporarily relevant response to the world.

These paintings are basically drip-field paintings, with thin films of color, dripped or streamed across the canvas. De Luca uses sheets of silk to introduce very fine gradients to the color fields, thus introducing a level of subtlety not usually found in drip painting.

This produces broad areas of subtly shifting color that mimic the mistiness and visual ambiguity of forms as seen at dusk against the Los Angeles hills. The colors are either stark, black and grays, with white or electric-orange bright spots, or thin, transparent blues and greens against hot oranges. There is a satisfying calmness, a certain emotional distance, in much of the work, a pervading serenity and silence.



Mara de Luca, DuskVeil, acrylic painting on silk and canvas, 18 x 24 inches, courtesy Luis De Jesus gallery, Culver City [Los Angeles]

They sometimes make literary and art-historical references, softly, never in the loud, noisy manner of so much of the last century's L.A. pop. Two of the paintings have a reference to Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Lost Time. When asked about the Proustian references, De Luca replied that she liked that Proust makes us so aware of his fictions. This is an appropriate answer in light of this show, for De Luca, herself, makes us aware of the fiction of her fictions.

Looking at De Luca's paintings, this means being made aware of the edges of the canvas, for example, using the edges of color fields to break the illusionistic mist of the color field and remind us that, yes, this is paint, and I've manipulated this paint, and laid in silk here and here.

We are never allowed to sink into a simple, conventional acceptance of their representational space; instead, we are repeatedly reminded, via drip-lines and color transitions, that there is an outer edge to a painting here, that we are looking at a construction, and that on some level the space is also inherently abstract.





Mara de Luca, New Moon, acrylic painting on silk and canvas, 5 x 8 feet, courtesy Luis De Jesus gallery, Culver City [Los Angeles]

The work is also a very personal response to a specific locus: a semi-veiled [by smog?] Los Angeles of lights at dusk, early evening, and deep night as seen by, say, someone cruising in a car around in it. It is the Los Angeles as experienced by a nocturnal, homo mobilis: that is, in a car, with a cell, inherently mobile; not the diurnal, standing-in-one-place homo sapien of the sun-drenched city portraits done by hundreds of previous artists.

In a way, these are the images of Los Angeles that Los Angeles has been waiting for: A new Los Angeles with depth, free of the superficiality of its surfaces, and without all its old, tired, glib, insular, self-mocking caricatures of itself. This is a Los Angeles that takes itself seriously, but humbly and responsibly, as the potential center of the international art world. Not the loud, full-of-itself noise of an earlier, more-or-less provincial Los Angeles; a Los Angeles, incidentally, all-too-often portrayed in the concurrent Pacific Standard Time shows going on at some 150 venues around southern California. As for the PST project, it is was David Hickey who pointed out how incredibly provincial the whole PST project is, something that sounds more like "something Denver would do." I agree.



Mara de Luca, Super Iridem (Over the Rainbow), acrylic painting on silk and canvas, 62 x 96 inches, courtesy Luis De Jesus gallery, Culver City [Los Angeles]

A panel discussion of the work held at Luis De Jesus discussed the concept of the sublime in painting as it might pertain to the exhibition. It is interesting that a panel of young artists today would discuss the sublime. The sublime, and its cousin Beauty, have been personae non-grata for almost a century. The generations raised inside the confines of Greenberg's and Fried's formalism as well as those adopting all the various guises of Post-Modernism have common ground in the extent of their considerable contortions to avoid even mentioning either the sublime or beauty.

De Luca does retain three defining aspects of the sublime: scale, subtlety within that scale, and a contrast between rationality and an expansive mode of experience that goes beyond the viewer's rational response. But the work also relies on mechanisms that are more current and 21st century: a self-conscious transparency of means [making the viewer aware of the illusion and the illusory apparatus one is using], reference to a motif generated by a non-static viewing mode [homo mobilis], and a selective rejection of both modernist and post-modernist values.

-Erik Reel

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