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Jill Poyourow: Red Bikini and Other Works

8/3/18 – 9/15/18

Grant Wahlquist Gallery is pleased to present “Red Bikini and Other Works,” an exhibition by Jill Poyourow. The show will run from August 3 through September 15, 2018. The gallery will hold an opening reception on Friday, August 3 from 5 – 8 pm, and host a talk with the artist on Saturday, August 4 at 1 pm.

“Red Bikini” presents recent paintings from a variety of Poyourow’s ongoing projects and demonstrates the breadth of her vision. It includes a number of works from her “Family Snapshot Paintings,” which here use images from an album of photographs taken in Ogunquit and Milbridge, Maine (where her grandparents retired) in the early 1970s. It also features works from the “Lands and People Paintings,” which adopt ethnographic photographs from vintage encyclopedias the artist often combines with biomorphic abstract marks. While these two bodies of work have differing historical perspectives, “Red Bikini” elucidates the formal and narrative connections between them. As the descendent of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, Poyourow has an obvious affection for the peasant women in the “Lands and People Paintings;” though drawn from the artist’s life, the “Family Snapshot Paintings” depict natural vistas and scenes of leisure that seem familiar to any viewer who has traveled with family or thumbed through a family album. Poyourow’s paintings find the personal in the historical (and vice versa) and expose the coinherence of the two.

Both series also manifest the artist’s life-long investment in the documentary, psychic, and formal aspects of photography. Poyourow initially made photographs in order to paint the landscape after dark, which led to subsequent work as a documentary photographer and study with Allan Sekula. These formative experiences remain essential to her current work. In her paintings, the memories represented in each photograph selected are further abstracted from their origins, while her transformation of them amplifies their aesthetic and emotional charge. A number of works in “Red Bikini” were painted from images Poyourow created by translating photographs into digital negatives in Photoshop, implying an attempt to reach behind the image to the original moment of exposure.

Poyourow’s use of photography in her paintings is not merely a novel way to address the complicated relationship between the two media. Her substitution of the time-intensive process of painting for the relative instantaneousness of the photograph reveals a degree of care and attachment to the moment it depicts. The recurrence of certain photographs in multiple paintings not only recalls photography’s inherent reproducibility, but also demonstrates that these paintings are not the idyllic results of nostalgia. Rather, the reiteration of images suggests that some may be surrounded by painful emotions or trauma.

If many of the images in “Red Bikini” are personal to the artist, their use in the context of each painting as well as in the exhibition as a whole is an attempt to find their public significance. As Edward Steichen wrote of his seminal exhibition “The Family of Man,” “We are concerned with photographs which express the universal through the individual and the particular, that demonstrate the importance of the art of photography in explaining man to man across the world[.]” Poyourow pays homage to Steichen’s exhibition, but one not

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without attendant doubts about the possibility of a specific image's ability to communicate the "universality" of "man." Instead, she offers her own use of images as one model among many for finding our place in the world. Though many artists have examined the camera's role in the construction of identity, in the age of social media a critical approach to this task remains essential.

Steichen also wrote that "The Family of Man" was "concerned with man in relation to his environment, [...] the good and the great things, the destructive and the stupid things." While in Milbridge with her family in August, 1973, Poyourow attended a screening of the post-apocalyptic movie *Soylent Green* at the Colonial Theater, and the remaining works in "Red Bikini" reflect on this memory as a pivotal early experience of the sublime. The film features Edward G. Robinson as Sol Roth, the last man on earth who can remember the natural world when it was still beautiful. Near the end of the film, unable to bear the degraded state of the world, Roth elects to be euthanized at a government-sponsored clinic. He watches images of the world as it once was on a panoramic screen accompanied by the music of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Grieg, then dies. (Robinson was himself dying of cancer during production of the film.) Deeply moved by this scene—which impressed on her not only the power of art but also, for the first time, the idea that death could be experienced not with fear but welcomed as a part of life—Poyourow kept the Colonial Theater's poster calendar for the season. In some paintings, sections of the poster calendar function as a frame for images such as renderings of animals painted in the Chauvet Cave in France (French archeologist and filmmaker Marc Azéma has proposed that they constitute an early form of cinema). Though conscious of our current environmental crises, these works, like many others in "Red Bikini," model a therapeutic relationship with images grounded in wonder and acceptance. They demonstrate that images of the past, even a painful past, can be used to prepare to greet the future with grace.

Jill Poyourow received a B.S. from Western Washington University, Bellingham, and a B.F.A. and M.F.A. from California Institute of the Arts, Valencia. She lives in Cape Neddick, Maine. Poyourow's solo exhibitions include POST, Los Angeles (catalogue with essay by Chris Kraus) and the Apex Gallery, South Dakota School of Mines, Rapid City. Her work has been featured in group exhibitions at venues including: POST; Thomas Solomon's Garage, Los Angeles; the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport; Dave Muller's Three Day Weekend, Los Angeles; Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions; the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles; the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena; the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California; Annika Sundvik Gallery, New York; Side Street Projects, Santa Monica; and in the First Biennale Internazionale delle Arti FiliForme.

The gallery is located at 30 City Center, Portland, Maine. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm, and by appointment. For more information, visit <http://grantwahlquist.com>, call 207.245.5732, or email info@grantwahlquist.com.