

JUDITH LINHARES WEAVES A SPELL

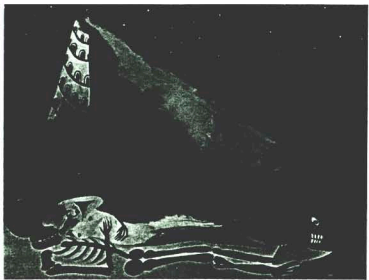
DAN CAMERON

It is to Judith Linhares' credit that her vision has been honed to perfection in the past five years.



Judith Linhares, *At Home in San Jose*, 1971. Ink on paper, 24 x 18".
Courtesy Gallery Paule Anglim.

Judith Linhares, *Ghostly Lover*, 1976. Gouache on paper, 7 x 9". Private Collection.



With the incapacity for enchantment that seems to permeate the art world, it is to Judith Linhares' credit that her vision has been honed to such perfection in the past five years. She of the bulbous heads and the white magic, the earth-sky dichotomies and wavering phantasms, seems to experience no loss of direction in the current tides of stylistic warfare. Ostensibly, this solidity (which is anything but inflexibility) springs from the fact that, if pressed, Linhares would probably disclaim the very existence of such a thing as "style" within the parameters of her work. Not loudly, you understand. It is merely that her reasons for making art have always seemed to spring from a need that is much deeper, and simpler, than the desire to appear in history books.

Born in Pasadena and now a New Yorker, Linhares is an artist in full mid-career, one who was too young to benefit from the golden years of dues-paying in the '70s, and is now deemed too advanced in her career to enjoy the cradle-robbing syndrome indulged in by the power elite of contemporary collectors. Because major American museums make little attempt to balance the scales when it comes to such matters, it is unfortunate that Linhares' most public exposures in recent seasons have been in two well-intentioned projects that were thoroughly (and, it must be said, deservedly) trounced by critics: Marcia Tucker's "Paradise Lost/Paradise Regained" at the 1984 Venice Biennale, and Lisa Liebmans' "Ripe Fruit" at P.S. 1 earlier this year. It is not that either Tucker or Liebmans thought too lightly of Linhares' work; on the contrary, they credited it with enough substance to hold up the flimsier visions of less adventurous colleagues. This—as Tucker must have realized when she included Linhares among the other rising stars of her generation in 1978's "Bad Painting"—is a curatorial mistake of great import. Such contexts do Linhares no justice because viewers wind up associating her less with fellow visionaries than with a reactionary backlash against the hellzapoppin' naughtiness (of which she could just as easily be considered an integral part) in New York today.

In this regard, it was satisfying to view the recent Linhares exhibition at Mo David. Although it has little to do with the neo-conceptualist antics of such starmaking East Village galleries as Nature Morte or International with Monument, Mo David has nevertheless remained at the forefront of the more iconoclastic art-posts. Even more astute on the part of gallery director Mike Osterhout was the decision to hang Linhares' work with that of David West, a fairly recent Chicago emigré whose carefully wrought images have tended to seem out of place at Gracie Mansion. The storefront gallery is not entirely conducive to stepping back and getting a good read off a painting, nor do I think Osterhout selected the right proportion of paintings-to-drawings in West's case (he is a rather magical draftsman). Still, the exhibition was one of the best kickoffs to the fall season in the East Village, and it was the power of Linhares' imagery which can largely be held responsible for its success (in—alas!—aesthetic terms).

This imagery has been in formation since as long ago as 1964, when Linhares produced a peculiar group of drawings that were never exhibited and which were somewhat idiosyncratic within the range of concerns that would occupy her through much of the succeeding decade. In these drawings, Linhares develops a crude but precise line to describe anonymous figures that behave as if in a continuous dream-state. Within the context of their time, these works are bravely anti-aesthetic through their cartoonish automatism, and to this degree they are indicative (though not directly reflective) of California art from this period. But from an early point, Linhares was working outside of a specific tradition or contemporary mores. While the interest in expressive figuration may have linked her to West Coast pioneers such as David Park and Elmer Bischoff, she did not realize her imagery from live models but rather from imaginary sources. In this regard, her earliest characteristic work could even be said to establish a link with the then-burgeoning school of Funk, particularly the assemblagists Berman, Hedrick and Kienholz, who forwarded the notion that one needn't undergo training in technique in order to make an important statement in art. The 1964 drawings may not have interrupted the stylistic progression of her paintings—which tended to make use of more traditional figurative motifs and techniques rather than the large-scale abstraction then in vogue—but it showed an important acknowledgment of the place for instinct within Linhares' art. However, she did not really come to grips with her own imagery until she had left the realm of painting for a few years.

Two disparate sources might be seen to influence Linhares for the next few years: the feminist art movement circulating in and around the Women's Building in Los Angeles (but equally influential in the Bay Area) and the work of H.C. Westermann. From the women's movement Linhares was discovering the importance of her own subjectivity in the creative process, while she was attracted to Westermann—whose profound effect on the Chicago Imagists did not belie the fact that his earliest circle of influence emanated out of San Francisco's Dilexi Gallery—for his unprecedented fusion of high craft and subconscious imagery. For a few years Linhares was primarily engaged in building delicate three-dimensional wood box constructions, such as 1971's *Amazon Warrior*, which combines plastic wood, human hair, wire, dental floss, and paraffin. Perhaps the most notable aspect of these boxes is the seemingly contradictory tendencies to combine a painstaking technique with a growing interest in dream imagery and such troves of the unconscious as fairy tales and myths. This apparent contradiction expresses itself formally in Linhares' peculiar adaptation of non-art materials with such adroit handling. While Mexican folk art is also a connection, it is important to see that the art's use of craft is also grounded in the feminist movement, which was involved in raising such notions as 'craft' to a high-art status. While Linhares was not about to become immersed in the formalist cul-de-sac of pattern-and-decoration, she was not always aware that technique as such was distancing her from the powerful content of her work. The finale of Linhares' early period might be seen in her 1972-73 trompe-l'oeil funerary paintings that approach a super-realist fetishization of the assemblage tradition.

Yet many of the unanswered questions in Linhares' box constructions had already solved themselves in her so-called minor works of the period, particularly a 1971 series of drawings entitled "At Home in San Jose," which are at once macabre, realist, funny, and very spontaneous. Like the drawings from seven years prior to this, the San Jose pictures (which also reflect a great deal of autobiographical information regarding the artist's marriage and recent move to that city) were not seen publicly, but their effect was more immediate, certainly to the degree that they melded Linhares' growing fondness for voodoo-art with the need to not be bored while making it. A series of flat collage-pictures from c. 1974, entitled "Going Down with the Devil," while not as successful as the San Jose drawings, is the first time that Linhares' conflicting needs for pictorial control and expression actually seem to work hand in hand. At this point, readings into Jung and an extended trip to Mexico prompted Linhares to begin working more directly onto the finished picture. Crucial to this breakthrough was a series of miniatures that—while still somewhat conservative in their composition and handling—finally start to reveal Linhares' painterly potential. Without overstating the obvious, it might be pointed out that at the moment she felt artistically free enough to begin making pictures that were distinctly unlike any other paintings of their period, she was also for the first time bridging the two separate stylistic camps implicated in her work of a decade earlier: the painterly figurative embodied by an artist like David Park, and the witty and primitivist neo-Dada tendency summed up in the early work of Ed Kienholz.

Once she hit her mature period, Linhares' work burst forth with an integrity and freshness that appears to have surprised even her. From 1976 on, her paintings seem completely personal and revealing of an inner logic, yet they are startling objects for their period. Not that in the late '70s there were no artists making work that utilized dream imagery, or figure-ground relationships contorted through comic disproportionality, or which applied the lessons of gestural abstraction to an idiosyncratic yet cyclical worldview. But Linhares' pictures are unusual even in an age of almost exclusively figurative picture-making because her work has established an equivalence of spirit between the artist's quest to discover and the viewer's quest to uncover. That is, Linhares' imagery enters the subconscious on very much the same level as the artist herself finds it. There is none of the pseudo-mystical posturing on the level of a Jonathan Borofsky or a Vernon Fischer; Linhares does not need to hobble the image-making process with rules or self-discovery games.

By the same token, this is painterliness which avoids both the narcissistic theatricalism of recent expressionist styles as well as the emblematic historicisms of imagist art. Out of more than a decade of rationalism which bordered on the academic, Linhares found that she

knew so much about making a picture that no matter how far she stretched her imagination, she could not create a painting that didn't work on formal grounds. More to the point, this is an art which fairly screams with deeply felt subject matter, and yet its most striking aspect is the diverting character which Linhares bestows on every detail of her imagery. She is often given to extending a motif out through numerous works within related allegorical structures; yet in each picture she finds an entirely different meaning for every application. As with any figurative artist working through the intricacies of sensibility-oriented work, Linhares' vision becomes clear to the viewer only over extended time, through multiple reworkings of *Psyche* and *Amor*, for example. The open-endedness and accessibility of her paintings can remind one of any range of modern masters from a Max Ernst or Frida Kahlo through Philip Guston or H.C. Westermann. One delights in the imagery, is affected by the narrative, impressed by the formal containment—yet one is most profoundly aware that the lasting value in Linhares' work is that of a great *temperament*. Inner truths are revealed which may never need to break the surface of consciousness or continuity. As with such a different artist as Kenny Scharf, we do not need to be told that the inner workings of Judith Linhares' pictures mirror that of the happenstance world; yet if the older artist seems to describe her understanding, it may only be because she has learned more, and also knows the limits of a single picture.

A painting by Judith Linhares has, in fact, both its compelling and its modest aspects. Using narrative as a key to unlock subjective truths about the world and its inhabitants, Linhares is first of all attracted to the elements: water, air, earth, and fire (in order of importance). She is particularly given to scenes of the sea and outer space, to man's trespassing on nature, to visions of human metamorphosis. Exaggerations of form and childlike reverie do not, however, mask her extraordinary powers of expressiveness, particularly in the realm of color. It is worth noting, though, that a division seems to exist (as it has in the past) between her casual and more ambitious works. In the former, Linhares conjures up spiritual fables with astonishing fecundity. Particularly in the large gouaches from 1980 on, she is able to project scenes of remarkable clarity without ever having to work her way back into the picture. Because these pictures also rely heavily on the underlying luminosity of the paper, there is an exhilarating shock of recognition when one realizes how completely her images conform to an internal but objective nature. The frequent scenes of figures in boats or in caves, searching for or grappling with some invisible lover/adversary—these become laced with other possible meanings, from the spiritual to the comic.

At no point does she allow the metaphysical allegories to become heavy-handed; in fact, every detail in Linhares' works on paper seems lighter than air. The figures themselves communicate their stranded self-denial via their very anonymity, as with the peculiar egg-faced protagonists that have begun to inhabit many of Linhares' recent extra-terrestrial scenes. More and more of the story is left ambiguous, as if to achieve a stage of temporal specificity would be equivalent to denying some amount of imagistic power. Thus, to refer to Linhares as a narrative artist, in the oblique but not inaccurate way one might refer to Jim Nutt, is to miss the paintings' integrity as pictures, particularly to the degree that they require no reference to other art forms or modes of expression. While fulfilling such criteria as luminosity and decorative integrity, the work gets under one's skin until it is hard to remember that there was a sensual attraction to start with.

This cannot exactly be said of Linhares' recent works on canvas which stake out very different terrain, succeeding on their own terms but with less allure. Many of these oils are of single figures in illusionistic space and have a strong relationship to sculpture. In these paintings, Linhares still attempts a drama of scale, but without the signature device of little figures on expansive grounds. As with her formative larger-scaled works, Linhares concentrates on the details of the figures themselves, thereby using a much less atmospheric space. A number of these recent oils begin with a unique expanse of golden yellow which can simultaneously represent skin, sunlight, wood, and stone. Obviously, the interest in conjured reality remains intact in these more concentrated paintings, particularly as concerns the artist's exploration of the notion of the body as a face, of the interchangeability of animate and inanimate materials. Nevertheless, these paintings form a completely different body of work than the gouaches, and while they may

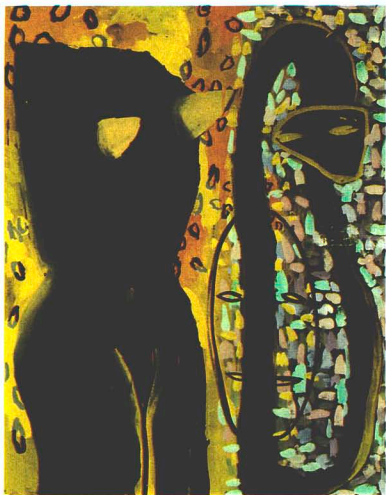
◀ Judith
Linhares, *Psyche and
Amor*, 1985.
*Gouache on
paper, 45 x 43".*
Courtesy Mo
David Gallery



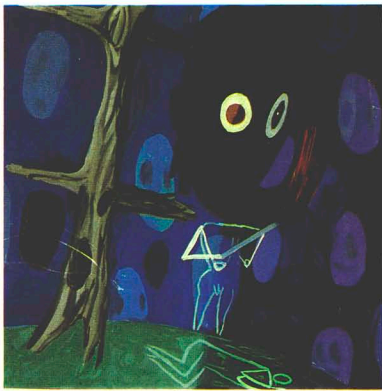
◀ Judith
Linhares, *First
Lovers in Space
with View of
Earth*, 1985.
*Gouache on
black paper,
31 x 40".*
Courtesy
Robert
Limmerman
Fine Arts.



Judith
Linhares, *Going
into Darkness*,
1979. *Gouache
on paper,
28 x 15".*
Private
Collection.



Judith Linhares, *Dark Charmers*, 1985. Gouache on paper, 34 1/2 x 26 1/4". Private Collection.



be thought of as more ambitious than the latter, they are also less ... well, magic.

I am glad I do not have to make a case for anything so trite as Judith Linhares being "an artist of our time." Her work has proceeded at a level of unwavering quality for a full decade, but one would hesitate to predict that Linhares will be galvanizing the latter half of the '80s. Her statement is at once too pure and too personal to imagine as a trend, and yet the art world may still find the self-composure to lend relative credence to unwavering truth.

