

An abstract painting featuring a stylized bee. The bee's body is composed of horizontal stripes in shades of yellow, orange, and brown. Its head is a mix of brown and red tones, with two thin, light-colored antennae extending upwards. The bee is positioned on the left side of the frame, appearing to fly towards the right. The background is a vibrant, textured composition of large brushstrokes in bright yellow, light blue, and dark black. The overall style is expressive and modern.

Judith Linhares

Sweet Talk

Judith Linhares's recent paintings are a triumphant expression of the power of pigment to engage the psyche and arouse the emotions. There is magic in these vivid canvases, and more than a little of that rule-breaking, white-knuckle approach to pulling out a painting that led Marcia Tucker to apply the phrase "bad painting" – a term with attitudinal not qualitative connotations – to a form of contemporary practice with which Linhares has long been identified. In paintings like "Wife" and "Bad Neighbors" (both 2000) recognizable images, often blunt and misshapen as if awaiting a final turn in the oven, are created with a few deft strokes of a color-loaded brush. Emerging as if by magic from an alchemical stew of vivid complementary hues and muted tonalities, evidence of Linhares's practice of beginning with color washes rather than predetermined subjects, they are harnessed to the mundane world of everyday reality with straightforward, uninflected titles: "Monarch", "Wife", "Tulips", and "Bad Neighbors".

Linhares was already something of a legend to many California painters when she moved to New York in 1980. Raised in the towns of Newhall and Hermosa Beach outside Los Angeles, her early work was steeped in hermetic narratives, Jung-influenced personal symbols, private mythologies, and surrealist dislocations. Often the images, painted using gouache on paper, were organized in retablo-like compositions in which black cats, skeletons, and Day of the Dead icons jostled with personal symbols chosen for their ability to resonate with both inner and outer meanings. A three-month stay in the silver producing city of Guanajuato in 1976 expanded Linhares interest in the images of Mexican popular culture as well as those of its twentieth-century modernist movements. Indeed Linhares was a devotee of cultural hybridity long before cultural and postcolonial studies became featured in university curricula, weaving images and sun-baked colors of the California Mexico border, and the gritty urban imagery of Cholo and lowrider culture together with a neo-Dada fusing of art and life that derived from her long interest in the work of California artists from Wallace Berman and Charles Garabedian to Bruce Connor and Wally Hedrick.

Linhares is an artist for whom painting has always mattered, not in terms of the

fashion ability of images or the seductions of theory, but rather as the surest path of synthesizing experience and interior life. Although her work owes much to the eccentric figuration of the 1970s San Francisco Bay Area artists like Joan Brown and Roy DeForest, what she took from their example had more to do with the freedom to experiment with form and content than with stylistic niceties (an example she passed on to a younger generation of Bay Area narrative imagists that include the painter M. Louise Stanley).

Her new paintings expand upon her practice of fusing direct applications of paint with a sophisticated handling of space and color. As the oils and gouaches have expanded in size they have developed a kind of magisterial calm despite her adherence to a kind of neo-expressionist paint handling. At the same time, she has relinquished none of her earlier commitment to intimate personalization and to the elaboration of a highly distinctive figuration.

In 1987, Linhares and Stephen Spretnjak bought a nineteenth-century farmhouse in upstate New York and began spending their summers in the country. Titles like "Thaw", "Monarch", and "Yellow Tree" (all 2000) reveal a new interest in tracking the cycles of nature and expressing their cyclical rhythms of decay and regeneration. Radiant with inner light, they suggest a resolute attachment to the natural world and a confident touch that are signs of her maturity as a painter. From the simplified drawing and breathtakingly subtle palette of "Tulips" (2000) sprouting from a bed of blood red soil to the oddball orches and toasted greens of "Bad Neighbors" (2000), Linhares continues her dialogue with a world in which drawing is color and paint is a force of nature.

Whitney Chadwick
San Francisco, 2001.

Whitney Chadwick writes about surrealism, feminism, and contemporary art. She is the author of "Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement" and "Women, Art, and Society". Her most recent book is "Amazons in the Drawing Room: the Art of Romaine Brooks."