THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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JUDITH LINHARES *Riptide*

by John Yau

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One of the best things about the state of painting right now is that nothing is central. You can literally paint whatever you want in whatever way you want. Amid this chaos, a viewer like myself understands and (for a second or two) even sympathizes with the critics and theorists who hate painting, and who have declared that a realm in which they have no authority has ceased to have any validity. How clever of them. (Benjamin H. D. Buchloh laid out this state of affairs in his 1981 essay, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," in which he argued that Richter negated the importance of content, following after Duchamp and Warhol, a view that echoes with Hal Foster's assertion that Warhol knew he could not beat society's capacity for image making, meaning capitalist production, so he joined them. Using Warhol and Richter as markers, these views assert that painting died around the time there was an explosion of multifarious forms of expression by women painters, including Pauline Boty, Joan Brown, Vija Celmins, Mary Heilmann, Harriet Korman, Yayoi Kusama, Maria Lassnig, Catherine Murphy, Elizabeth Murray, Dona Nelson, Susan Rothenberg, Pat Steir, and Marjorie Strider.) However, as assailed as the situation of painting was, and continues to be, it is one where Judith Linhares most likely feels comfortable, because she has always had to earn her own authority, taking nothing for granted.

Born in California in 1940, Linhares met Wallace Berman and Bruce Conner when she was a teenager, and saw Berman's infamous debut at Ferus Gallery in 1957 before the police shut it down for obscenity. She studied in the Bay Area and was steeped in a very different tradition than the one celebrated in and by New York. In 1976, she lived for three months in Guanajuato, which has a museum full of preserved cadavers from the 19th century—a cross between *Night of the Living Dead* and Disneyland—and began making her mature work shortly after returning to the United States. This is when she was able to not only synthesize the narrative and the painterly, as Brooks Adams has pointed out, but also to bring into play her familiarity with Outsider Art, retablos, Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera, and the tradition of strong women Surrealist artists in Mexico (Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington). Linhares's work is informed by a tradition that is alternative to both New York and San Francisco. While Adams has rightfully connected Linhares to Symbolism, and the work of James Ensor and Edvard Munch, it seems to me that her career is defined by her investigation of an alternative world largely populated by mostly nude young women,

Eden before the arrival of Adam and the snake. This, in turn, is connected to the humanist Italian painters' exploration and celebration of the pagan world in the face of the Church's attempt to control the production of images and content, which has its own echoes in today's academies.

Typically, Linhares begins her paintings by defining an abstract ground made of vertical bands or stripes of luminous colors in complementary or contrasting color schemes. It is out of this abstract ground that the images emerge, inspired perhaps by a dream, a preoccupation, imagination, or a memory. The figures and things echo the ground both in their luminosity and brushwork. Often they are resting on an abstract pattern (checkerboard or striped blanket or cloth). *Riptide*, which is the title of this exhibition, is a strong offshore current that cannot be seen from the surface; it is dangerous and can literally pull a victim out to sea. In the face of this danger Linhares's women hang out, cavort, play, enjoy their freedom. Danger (or repression) be damned. In "Feast" (2010), a naked woman stands by a sliding glass door, between a burning log and a small pine tree, devouring a chicken leg. A slice of chocolate cake is on the floor, by the pine tree. There are two other chicken legs lined up on the plate she holds with her other hand. She is ravenous and all business.

Linhares's paintings are funny, strange, and disconcerting. In "Slope" (2011), a naked woman lies upside-down on a checked cloth, her legs up and bent, her feet resting on a tree that is more or less in the middle of the painting. To her right, on the other side of a plate of chocolate donuts and a bottle, a second nude woman sits in an anatomically impossible position. The upside-down woman's pose has an eerie resonance with the deposition of Christ, the scene from the passion in which he is lowered from the cross. In "Déjà Vu" (2009), a nude woman bends over and stares back at the viewer from between her legs. Her eyes are vacant, as if she has just come back from a party or been released from a spaceship. The round, bubble-like forms punctuating the striped ground echo these readings. The difference is that in this world there is no remorse or recrimination—a potentially embarrassing pose would never be sent from one cell phone to another. Trust is never broken.

Linhares's alternative world is in the vicinity of Watteau's Cythera, the birthplace of Venus, but we know that we will never get there. The artist's good-natured, contagious humor has too sharp an edge to traffic in fantasies of ideal love. The two men in her recent painting assume anatomically impossible positions, in order, in one case, to carry a petite woman on his arms and shoulders. It seems to me that one reason critics and theorists pronounced painting dead—and this was integral to Clement Greenberg's whole take, starting with "American-Type Painting" (1955)—is that they could not face women's longing, collective or otherwise. Linhares is a pioneer.