

Deborah Lee Galesi's New Age Vision of Renaissance Aesthetics

The New Jersey-born painter Deborah Lee Galesi, whose solo exhibition fills the entire space of Montserrat Gallery, 584 Broadway, from March 8 to 26, and will also be featured year-round in the gallery's ongoing salon show when it relocates to Chelsea in the coming months, flies in the face of everything that is sacred in contemporary figurative art by trusting totally to her imagination as impetus for her imagery. Which is to say, she eschews commercial strategies such as the irony that many young artists employ self-protectively, and by doing so runs the risk of appearing unhip, for all her obvious draftspersonly abilities and painterly skills.

Galesi, however, is obviously too committed to her own personal vision to fret over fleeting fashions, and one need only glance at her resume to see that she is well trained: She holds an MFA in art and psychology from the University of Colorado and has also studied privately in New York with instructors from The Art Students League, as well as at the Villas Schifanoia and the Liceo Artistic in Florence, Italy, where she is highly regarded as a member of the Professional Register of European artists.

Not only has Florence been good to her, in terms of rewarding her talent with recognition, it appears to have become a kind of spiritual home for Galesi, who has been fascinated with the Renaissance ever since she was a child.

Nowhere could probably seem farther from the glories, both architectural and artistic, of the Renaissance, than Paterson, New Jersey, where Deborah Lee Galesi grew up. Yet, that typical American river town has its own unique artistic history, having been immortalized in a great poem called "Paterson" by William Carlos Williams. And it could almost appear that Galesi picked up, perhaps by osmosis, some of Williams' belief in particulars, rather than vague generalities, as the only valid building blocks of art, given the attention that she lavishes on detail in her paintings, approximating the actual appearance of specific things to lend even her most unlikely flights of fantasy a stunning verisimilitude.

Indeed, it is Galesi's consummate skills as

a realist that allow her to travel so extensively in imaginative realms, making paintings that defy all the laws of logic yet still manage to project a unique emotional power. There appears to be no image that Galesi will not dare commit to canvas. Her technical ability enables her to take risks that would daunt a less proficient, not to mention less intrepid, painter. Take, for example, the subject of her painting "Metamorphosis of Atlantis" in which sea creatures take flight on butterfly wings

gift for intuitive pictorial organization.

In the painting entitled "Medicine Wheel," Galesi employs the format of a mandala as the organizing principle of the composition. Within its central circle (ornately bordered by stylized ocean waves ala Japanese prints and pink silhouettes of the leaping dolphins that are a recurring motif of her work), she includes sequential images of sorceresses, angels, and other ethereal beings of light in enchanted landscape settings. The painting reflects her

interest in New Age and metaphysical disciplines. Her esoteric studies provide her with many diverse symbols, which she often combines in her work, freely intertwining aspects of Christianity, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and other religious paths to suggest a universal spirituality.

Even more down to earth subjects are treated in a manner so imaginatively as to transform them into visionary statements, as seen in Galesi's oil on linen "Nostalgia." Here, the figure of an elderly man dominates the center of the composition. Wearing a short sleeved white sport shirt and gray slacks, he sits hand-to-cheek, in a manner reminiscent of Rodin's "The Thinker," except that his legs are more casually crossed. Over him is superimposed the semi-transparent form of a large blue butterfly, and over his head, under a rainbow arch reminiscent of certain Renaissance icon formats, various images are seen in a sequential frieze. They show a child growing into an adolescent and then a young man and finally a mature adult while holding what appears to be a caterpillar in the stages of transformation into a butterfly. The painting, executed in a classically realized style behold-



"Nostalgia"

amid similarly airborne uprooted trees and a dolphin balances a glowing golden orb that could be the sun on its nose like a circus seal, amid other unnatural wonders illuminated by a neon-pink sky. Like Malcolm Morley in his post-photo realist fantastic expressionist phrase, Deborah L. Galesi seemingly pushes the imagistic envelope as far as it can possibly go in some of her more surreal and jam-packed compositions. Yet she invariably accomplishes the considerable feat of making all of her disparate images blend harmoniously by virtue of her

en to the Old Masters, yet employing imagery with a postmodern freedom that also harks back to the surrealists, is informed by her admiration for both Michelangelo and Salvador Dali. However, "Nostalgia" makes a deeply personal and highly original statement about memory and metamorphosis, the cycles of life, the specter of mortality, and the hopeful prospect of renewal and rebirth in a manner that is pure Deborah Lee Galesi.

—Maurice Taplinger

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