

From the Angelic to the Sublime: Another View of Deborah Lee Galesi

One of the centerpieces of Deborah Lee Galesi's recent solo exhibition at the 584 Broadway location of Montserrat Gallery (which will include her work in its year-round salon on moving to its new space in Chelsea), was a large oil on canvas called "Look Inside," which took its inspiration from the biblical Psalm 23: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

The painting presented a kind of freeform contemporary version of *The Last Supper*, populated by an eclectic cast of characters, some in full color, others in grisaille, representing several nationalities. They were gathered around a circular table split down the middle, as if by an earthquake, its pyramidal opening revealing a rainbow-vibrant realm of cosmic phenomena, mountain ranges, waterfalls, winding rivers, and verdant foliage. Within this vast visionary landscape, which could represent an earthly Paradise, a woman in native dress bathed an infant in shallow water, while white swans glided along, porpoises leapt through the air in formation, and a luminous angel waded nearby. For all its multilayered imagistic complexity, as the title "Look Inside" suggests, the message of the painting seemed profoundly simple: Look past the conference tables where bargains are struck between government leaders and politicians negotiating the fate of humanity to one's own inner being, where the real truth of existence lies within easy reach.

One of the things that makes Galesi's work so fascinating is her willingness to take risks that would daunt a less intrepid painter, as seen in another large canvas called "Infinite Quantum Leap: Infinite Possibilities," which has become an emblematic work of her career, having been repeatedly reproduced in the *Village Voice* and other publications. In this composition a prehistoric hunter and another figure who appears to be a medieval knight brandishing a long sword ride the back of a fire-breathing dinosaur, while a huge wave of water whooshes up behind the huge creature like a jet-trail, a white dolphin discernible within its white foam. And far be it for Galesi to stop there: the figure of a shaman sitting in



"Swept Away by the Dolphin Vortex"

the lotus position holding a ceremonial staff and a sort of sparkler god with luminous, wiggling rays emanating from his entire body can be seen levitating in the deep, nocturnal darkness surrounding the main figures!

In this large oil, too, the artist appears to be paying tribute to indigenous inspirations and imparting wisdom channeled from the ancients. Yet the real triumph, in strictly aesthetic terms, is how successfully Galesi balances all of these disparate images within a composition that goes far beyond the efforts of other international Neo-Expressionists in her all-out willingness to share the truth of her experience with the viewer. For Galesi, a native of Patterson New Jersey, this means calling upon the technical skills that she honed at the Art Students League in New York City and during a long period of study in Florence, Italy, where she soaked up the methods of the Renaissance masters who were her earliest inspiration, in order to make every image that she paints a palpable representation of her inner reality.

This a complex undertaking indeed, since Galesi's inner reality is fed by a variety of esoteric sources, which include her fascina-

tion with everything from Native American Culture to the art of the Etruscans and the ancient Egyptians, as well as the New Age theories of Deepak Chopra, among any number of other passing interests which invariably find their way into her pictures. An image especially emblematic of Galesi's spiritual path is the oil on canvas she calls "Infinite Dance of Bliss," in which a figure that appears to be a symbolic self-portrait floats above a volcanic landscape in a stratosphere where smaller beings of pure light seem to surf on streams of purplish illumination emanating from the stars. Here, on a canvas whose perfectly symmetrical square format enhances the composition's sense of infinite space, is a vision of transcendence to rival those of no less delightfully daft a British visionary than the great William Blake! And while this could seem an enterprise fraught with peril for a contemporary painter, Galesi possesses

both the technical skill and the spiritual conviction to make the painting succeed.

Even more startling in conceptual terms, yet just as successful in its own manner is the large oil called "Swept Away by the Dolphin Vortex," in which a dolphin with the body of a woman rises like a Botticelli Venus out of the sea, set against a watery swirl that gives Galesi the opportunity to flaunt her virtuoso painterly skills in one of her boldest, most dazzlingly Expressionistic compositions to date.

Deborah Lee Galesi has already amassed an impressive exhibition history around the country and in various places abroad: France, Japan, Australia, and particularly Italy, where she is especially esteemed. She has also exhibited in New York City in the past. However, the sheer range and scope of her most recent solo show at Montserrat Gallery (which included many more paintings than those described here, among them smaller works such as the pensive nude "Solitude," presenting a more intimate side of her talent) seemed to make it a landmark in her career.

—Maurice Taplinger

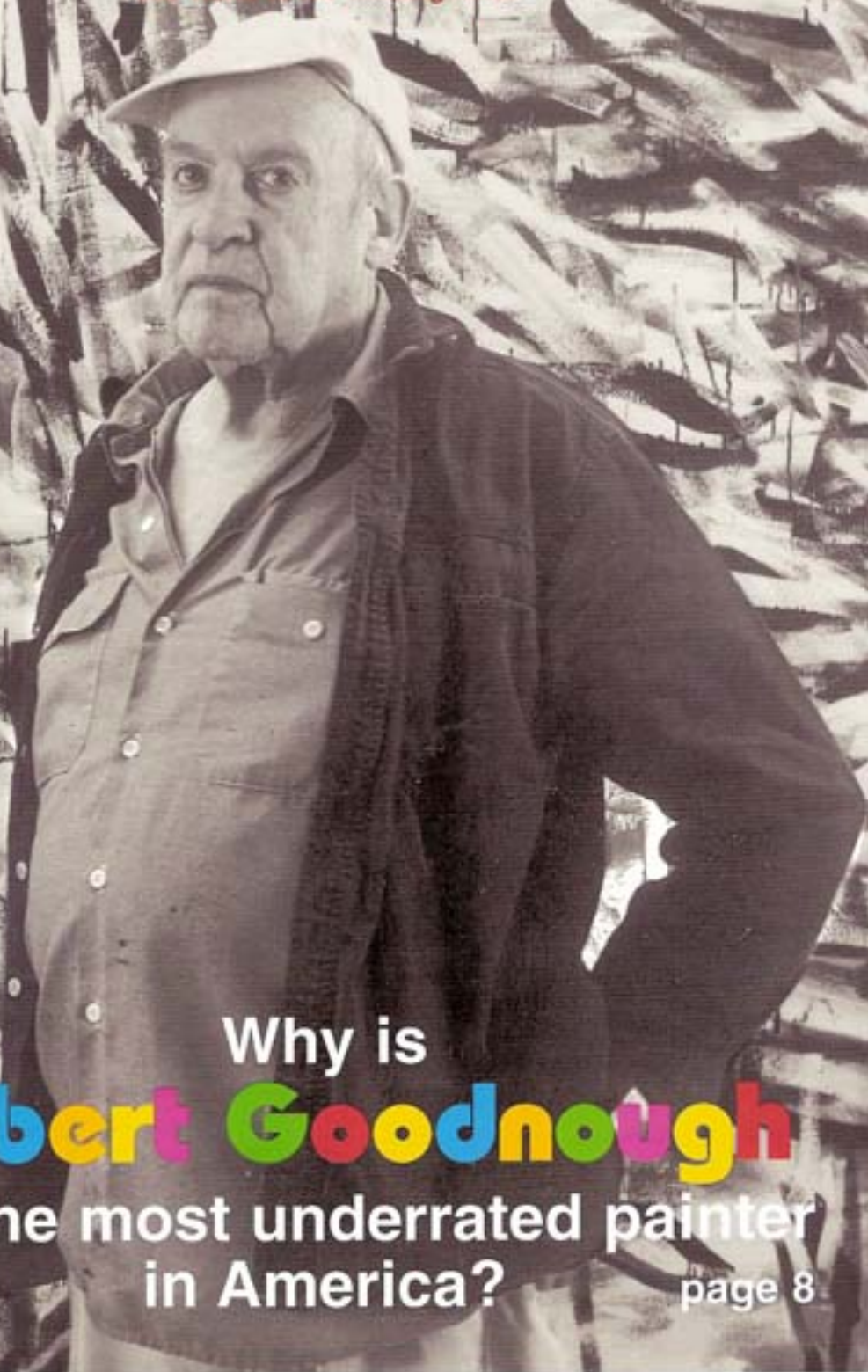
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Robert Goodnough

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