

Marie-Hélène Beaudry's New Solo Show Signals a Bold New Departure

It takes great courage and conviction for an artist to drastically simplify his or her iconography (especially when the earlier, more complexly configured subject matter has been favorably received by critics and collectors), although it is almost always a sign of growing aesthetic authority and what we generally refer to as a "mature style." There is, after all, the danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water, to use a well worn cliché that may apply a little more aptly than usual here, since the first works that I ever saw and reviewed by the celebrated Quebec artist Marie-Hélène Beaudry, in her solo show at Caelum Gallery in Chelsea in 2007, depicted a bad little girl who dangles her "mini me" doll into the waves of the sea in a series that could, according to one's mindset, suggest either a baptism or a drowning.

That first series, with its nonlinear narrative immediately captivated me, as did the second exhibition by Beaudry that I saw in the same venue, entitled "Impulse to Run," which revolved around the allegory of a sprinting schoolboy set against the apparent map of a city that transformed with closer inspection into home tailoring patterns of the type women use to make clothes for themselves and their children. Here again, there was a story, however submerged; just as there also was in Beaudry's 2010 New York solo show at Caelum, this time in which the different stages of life from early childhood were depicted in a gender-blending procession (again set against patterns for home-tailoring) much in the manner of an evolutionary chart.

What all three shows shared in common was that not only was the narrative partially submerged under a array of intriguing symbols and subtexts, but the imagery was as well, under Marie-Hélène Beaudry's characteristically succulent washes, and drips of semitransparent veils of diluted oil pigment, which lent each series a layered complexity, a depth of tone and color that greatly enriched her compositions with qualities as subtle as those in any abstraction.

Indeed, Beaudry's combination of intriguing imagery and semitranslucent color areas (predominantly pale earth tones and grays interspersed with bursts of brighter hues) reminded one of the contrasts between image and palette in the paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, although Beaudry's manner of melding those elements was, from the start, considerably more enigmatic, verging as it always was, on a staggered narrative that could seem influenced by the sequential flow of cinematography.

Aside from Beaudry's characteristic painterly panache, which is still very much present, all of this has changed in her most recent series of tondos. The round shape of the canvases is not only evocative of the shape of the planet earth but projects an impression instantly more boundless and infinite-seeming than even a perfectly symmetrical square. The new works, although suggestive of a multitude of things, appear at first glance adamantly abstract. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the large, gracefully configured white forms floating weightlessly yet prominently amid the intersecting areas and linear strokes of pale blue, deeper blue, green, pink, actually represent giant white feathers.

Feathers, after all, have long been universally potent images in many cultures. The ancient Greeks saw them as symbols for the wisdom of



the gods and the heavens; in Hindu mythology they refer to the qualities of kindness, patience, and good fortune; the Buddhists associate them with openness, and regard feathers of the peacock — a bird capable of subsisting on poisonous plants — as symbols of the ability to thrive in the face of suffering. In Christianity white feathers, in particular indicate ascension and purity of the soul. And in dream analysis, they indicate innocence and a fresh start in spiritual terms.

Beaudry brings the resonance inherent in all of these various meanings combined in the suite of seven large (5 feet and 7 inches in diameter) oil paintings on circular canvases which she calls "Handle with Care," after the stickers that are routinely placed on fragile packages for shipping. The hardly arguable implication is that our world is presently in an endangered state of fragility and must be handled with the greatest care to assure its survival and that of our species and all the other life forms familiar to us. This simple yet profound message takes on a striking impact in Beaudry's compositions, which possess a presence both imposing and serene. Although enlivened here and there by dripped rivulets that flow somewhat unsettlingly upward rather than down, the artist has provided rectangular spaces within the outer circles of some of the paintings in a neutral value that, as she puts it, "invites one to stop and reflect."

In a much different mood but with a similarly sacred feeling as the large stately canvases that Mark Rothko created for a nondenominational chapel in Houston, Texas, Beaudry's newest works project a sense of secular spirituality. The feathery forms take

on the significance of an amulet on an improvised altar, suggesting one of those rituals that artists, like latter-day shamans, create spontaneously.

The subdued palette of pastel blues and greens that Beaudry here employs also suggests a deconstructed pastoral realm, as if the blue skies and verdant green foliage of Impressionism had been shattered into Cubist planes, softened by the forms of the virginal white feathers with their serrated edges.

The exhibition also includes two majestic installations that the artist refers to as "mosaics," each comprised of some twenty-eight smaller circular oil paintings mounted within a grid and covering two gallery walls. As with the larger paintings, each circle contains a discrete composition filled with a remarkable variety of colors, tones, and forms with their own distinct character.

This exhibition amounts to a giant step for Marie-Hélène Beaudry, who has turned away from the entertainment value of the narrative mode and all the movement that it implies to make emblematic statements of enduring and iconic stillness.

— Ed McCormack

Marie-Hélène Beaudry, Caelum Gallery,
508-526 West 26th Street,
October 9 - 20, 2012
Reception: October 11, 6 - 8pm