

Marie-Hélène Beaudry at Caelum Gallery: Scenes from the Life of a Living Doll

The little girl with the thick brown pig-tails in the black and white polka-dot blouse and bright red skirt has an eerie, fixed smile on her face, as she romps on the seashore, sometimes in the company of a double, who could either be her twin or one of those imaginary friends lonely children sometimes conjure up as playmates.

The latter possibility would seem especially likely, since the little girl is actually a doll and is therefore somewhat imaginary herself, being a repository for the imaginations of others. However, she is “a living doll”—not in the way that term is usually meant, as a signifier for “cute” (she seems too complex a character to be summed up with such a saccharine word), but in the most literal sense: a doll that has actually come to life, like Pinocchio, the little puppet in Carlo Lorenzini’s nineteenth century morality tale for children, whose nose grew whenever he told a lie.

Like Pinocchio, too, the little doll-girl who serves as the protagonist of Marie-Hélène Beaudry’s new series of paintings at Caelum Gallery,

508-526 West 26th Street, from October 16 through November 3 (with a reception on October 18, from 6 to 8 PM), is engaged in a sequence of picaresque adventures. However, one does not get the sense that its denouement will teach her (and us) some moral lesson. For Beaudry is a quintessentially postmodern painter, and postmodernists in both visual art and literature do not go in for denouements. Nor do they generally like to offer pat prescriptions regarding right and wrong.

So rather than a morality tale, what this widely exhibited and celebrated Quebec artist’s fifth solo show at Caelum gallery suggests is a nonlinear existential fable as devoid of closure as the DVD by Beaudry that runs continuously on a video monitor in the gallery in tandem with her paintings. It is called “Life is Doll,” and features a succession of people in the Beaudry’s studio (where some of the same paintings as in the gallery can be seen on the walls), seated on a little vehicle with wheels—a “dolly”—attempting to answer a question posed by the artist: “Why is Life Doll?”

Perhaps because of the artist’s French

Canadian accent, and because some of the people being interviewed might also be more fluent in French than English—not to mention that the question would also make more sense that way anyway—most of them seem to take the word “doll” as “dull.” (That English is obviously a second language for the artist and for at least some of the interviewees causes a slight cognizant dissonance that makes the pun go down easily!)

The one exception is a bodacious younger woman who bursts into a raucous version of the song, “Black Satin Dolls,” then grows more subdued and says, “Life is a doll, and like a doll, you should take care of it...”

The others, however, almost all offer

its undertow could seize the doll-child by her ankles and drag her out to sea; or as if one of its waves could rear up to engulf her forever in the general overcast gray of the painterly day.

The child, however, appears fearless, even Napoleonic, as she sits in one picture astride a toy lamb, sporting a floppy, feathered hat like that of a Cavalier, with a much smaller Barbie-type figure dangling from one hand like some vanquished foe or trophy in a War of the Dolls. Or, in another, appears to dunk a somewhat larger bald baby-doll in the water as though to baptize or drown it, all the while regarding the viewer with those big, not-quite-innocent eyes and that familiar fixed grin. Or, in yet another, appears impish,

smiling her weird little Howdy Doody grin as a gust of wind lifts her red skirt to reveal her blank little doll buttocks, while her double gawks mischievously on the beige beach, with the vast gray sea filling the entire horizon like a silvery sky.

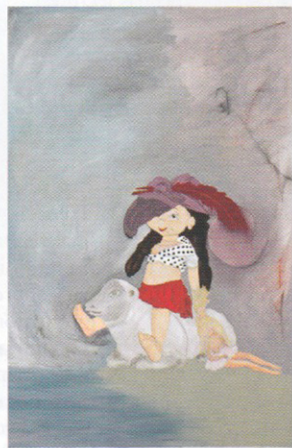
Indeed, like Luc Tuymans and Marlene Dumas, Marie-Hélène Beaudry has a way of using close-valued

colors to blur the boundaries and distinctions between forms, making one thing look like another, creating a sense of ambiguity that can charge the most ordinary moments with an atmosphere of anxiety or even sublimity.

Such moments exemplify magic that is possible in painting, the only medium besides poetry in which a perception of something ostensibly real can metamorphose from concrete to fanciful in the time it takes to traverse the short distance from the brain to the hand.

In fact, these pictures are invariably as much about the subtle little felicities of painting as whatever they purport to depict. Just as her brushstrokes are simultaneously surrogates for the flow of water and objects of delectation in their own right, the size of her paintings in relation to the body of the viewer says something as actual and abstract as the spaces she evokes within the confines of the canvas, demonstrating the conceptual complexity that makes Marie-Hélène Beaudry a consistently fascinating artist.

—Ed McCormack



Three paintings from the “Life is Doll” series

earnest explanations of why life is or isn’t dull, making the entire tape an intriguing series of non sequiturs that reminded this reviewer of the tongue-in-cheek “screen tests” that Andy Warhol used to conduct for prospective “superstars” at the Factory. Only, unlike Andy’s preening exhibitionists, the people in Beaudry’s video seem infinitely more thoughtful, as they respond to the question, as though to defend life itself (“Why is life dull? I don’t think so...I find it painful sometimes, but not dull,” says one man).

Very often video and painting don’t work together very well, each distracting from the other; but in this exhibition the two disparate mediums meld perfectly, the indeterminacy of the interviewees, as they ponder the issue of ennui, complementing the interestingly “unfinished” quality of the paintings, wherein even the waves often appear tentative, as they roll up to the shore like murky gray shadows. Like the shadows on a sleepless child’s bedroom wall morphing into monsters, at times the shadowy surf in Beaudry’s painting can appear almost sinister, as though