

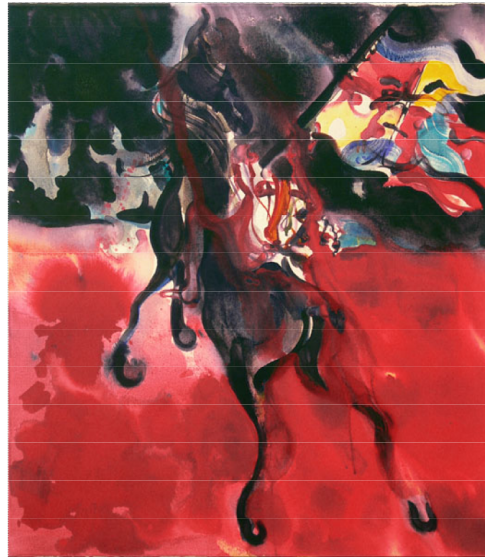
Bettina Sellmann: Taina . cosmogony .
make your own paper dragon
by Cassandra Neyenesch

Derek Eller Gallery November 21, 2008 – January 10, 2009

The figures in paintings by Bettina Sellmann at Derek Eller Gallery emerge from chaos like misty, gem-colored invocations of the fearful nothingness ancient cultures believed to be just outside the human realm. There is an intense, brooding romanticism to the people that move through her works; they appear to be both fairy tale characters and psychological portraits. If civilization is a metaphor for our conscious mind, then the nebulous background is perhaps the unconscious through which the figures float, meet and interact, beset by some nameless fear or desire.

In numerous visits to Sellmann's studio over the last decade, I've been impressed by her incredible fluidity as a painter, as if she is leaning close to the canvas and breathing onto it. Her use of color is so intensely expressive that a smear at the side of a face can suggest laughter, or a wayward thought. She uses only watercolor, soaking the canvas with pigments to obtain a matte, drenched quality, or drawing on it with quick, adept lines.

Sellmann has always explored the anxiety on the other side of pink, as it were.



Bettina Sellmann, "Rider," 2008,
watercolor on canvas, 31.5 _ 27.5 inches

In earlier larger-than-life-sized portraits of fashion models' faces taken from magazines, agape mouths translate to a look of pain or horror or sexual ecstasy or some indecipherable mix of the three. Even in these works taken from cheap, popular imagery, there is never anything coy or satirical; Sellmann aggressively strives against the kitsch or ironic removal of artists like Karen Kilimnik, to whom she has been compared—falsely, in my opinion. Rather, she paints from images—engravings, paintings, snapshots—that tap into what she calls “Inner spaces of consciousness.” She has been obsessed with archetypes: kings and queens, knights and soldiers, and also with the particular in the moment of crisis each one of her works seems to be illustrating.

At least two of the works at Derek Eller, “At Church” and “Sexual Fantasies of Women,” are taken from engravings of the story of Faust, with its themes of lust, guilt and power. The latter shows a nude woman being assaulted by a cloaked, faceless man, her body arced back, his a dark diagonal slash above her. The pleasure and violence of the moment are locked into the figure's gestural equilibrium, which perfectly contains the fantasy's content. “Dog Dreams,” taken from the image of a dog consuming a man, is almost blotted out by the violent splotch of red taking over the center of the piece, suggesting the dog's internal wish-fulfillment imagery as completely subsumed by an ecstasy of blood. It is as if by going further and further into the story of these characters, allowing herself to get sucked into these sparkling but foreboding worlds, Sellmann can express some essence of her own mental landscape and also tap into the underground ocean that feeds our collective romance with fantasy and myth. She suggests the dark forces underlying our toy stores full of sparkly plastic ponies and purple princesses.

Sellmann's work can sometimes be quite minimal, but it is clearly linked to the Baroque's sinuous, scrolling forms and drenched deep reds, and a kind of beauty that seems inextricable from a consciousness of death. “The Rider” is taken from the image of a German soldier dying on his horse in full gallop, falling backward in a pose that looks almost orgasmic. In Sellmann's blood-washed version the rider's face almost disappears behind the exuberant rendering of his flag, as if the ideology for which it stands has taken over the soldier's psychic state as well as his life. Sellmann is fascinated with the belief systems that make people destroy themselves. Over and over again the space between pain and pleasure, death and ecstasy is limned in the expressions and interactions of her figures; it may be that these new paintings are about the ruination we unconsciously desire.