

Linda Stark: Memory, Metaphor and the Mysterious Stranger

A conversation with Linda Stark and a review of her exhibition "Hearts" at David Kordansky Gallery

by Gary Brewer | October 17, 2020



Linda Stark, *Bleeding Hearts*; Photo credit Gary Brewer

"Grief and joy come circling to all, like the turning paths of the Bear among the stars."

- *Sophocles, The Women of Trachis*

"You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."

- *Helen Cixous, The Laugh of Medusa*

Our memory is a living archive: a collection of experiences that are held in some form; a metaphysical system of storing moments from our lives. These are not inert, discrete bundles- but living entities that are percolating with osmotic interactions, comingling with other memories, being altered through novel experiences that change the tone or meaning of our recollections. A map of our stored remembrances would look like a Hubble deep space image of the cosmos filled with infinite spirals, constellations of living systems that are all linked by vast forces.

To speak with the artist Linda Stark about her work is to be led through an immense storehouse of images that are a biographical record of resonant memories from her life. Drawings of the uterus, fallopian tubes and vagina from the book *Our Bodies Ourselves*- that Linda read like the bible as a teenager- appear in her paintings, looking like some arcane symbol from medieval alchemy, or take on the aspect of an animal. The lines of the palm of her hand- a fascination with chiromancy- that our destiny is told through these lines- was instilled in her imagination from a photography teacher whose interest in palmistry would awaken her imagination to see the lines of her palm like a brand, foretelling her life's path. Her sister is a tarot card reader and from a young age, these images and their power to awaken archetypal memories, filled her mind with imagistic poetry of how a symbol becomes a catalyst to awaken the soul to mystery, and the boundaries of knowing.



Linda Stark, *Cyclops Fountain*; Photo credit Gary Brewer

Linda was raised outside of any particular religious belief; so she comes to spiritual and religious images, such as the Sacred Heart, or the heart pieced by a sword from Catholic iconography- as an outsider. She allows the image to illicit narratives that arise from her personal history and the collective history of consciousness, seeing them through the open doors of mind and allowing the images power to animate her paintings.

Her current show at David Kordansky Gallery, Hearts, September 19–October 24, is an exquisite exhibition where one can see the image of a heart at play, its sense shaped by the myriad ways that the artist communicates intention through layers of matter and meaning. Where the application of deeply crafted images, sometimes years in the making, exert a strange power; the comingling of humor and an absolute serious dedication to painting as a form of alchemy, create resonate objects. In her paintings a subjective life gazes back at the viewer with a knowing wink that we are here, now; and in this symbiotic life between the subject and object, an arch smile bends like an inverted rainbow through time and space.

When I asked Linda about this series she said, "I like resurrecting bankrupt imagery or clichés, because there is often a current of truth within them, which is why they are so popular. With Hearts, I liked the challenge of trying to make an interesting painting about possibly the most popular symbol in the world: to subvert the cliché, or present different meanings."

These are strangely beautiful paintings that synthesize many elements together: they are deeply embedded in the mysterious capacity of the materiality of pigment to convey thoughts, ideas and feelings. The symbols and imagery travel through time and cultures: the tarot deck, the uterine image that seems a nod to medieval symbols and anatomical illustrations, and the eye in "Cyclops Fountain", that looks like an eye from Monsters Inc. It is through a mysterious conduit that these elements are synthesized and conveyed directly into the central nervous system, bringing matter, images and symbols in tow, down into the black hole of consciousness.

One of the most compelling paintings in the exhibition, "Cyclops Fountain", is a synthesis of many forces. In this painting, the artist achieves a curious fusion of cryptic ciphers: the flat emblematic symbol-imagery that conveys a sense of mystery and gravitas is blended with an eccentric wackiness through its reference to pop iconography. As with all of her work, there is an extremely disciplined approach to painting, where her exceptional craft and attention to surface and sculptural relief is a complete aesthetic endeavor on its own. The sculptural texture of the cerulean blue eyelids, adds a vivid focus to one's engagement with the piece; it alerts the mind to the physical immediacy of being present. It is hard to put into words, but the highlights and shadows of the carefully crafted texture, like surface chop of the sea seen from above, fractures the spatial window of the painting and allows the simultaneity of image/space and physical presence to put a weird and playfully engaging pressure on one's consciousness. This tension awakens a psychological complexity achieved with humor, philosophical depth and a knowing wink.

In our conversation Linda said of this painting, "The Cyclops is a symbolic representation of 'Eternal Cryer': a fountain of tears for the sorrows of the world. I paint with sincerity and absolute seriousness, but the paintings also contain an arch sense of humor. The size of these



Linda Stark; Image courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles Photography by Elon Schoenholz

paintings is a hand held scale, specific to my ability to hold them in my hands, to tip and control the flow of the drips. The tears in "Cyclops Fountain" are done by chance operations- it took three layers of paint to create the flow of tears down the canvas. The fluidity of the paint refers to the fluidity of the body. My oil paintings often take years to finish. When I set them aside to dry, it allows time to contemplate the imagery and my approach to it. This layering process is akin to geological time. I know a painting is finished when it laughs at me."

The piece, "Bleeding Heart", reminded me of duck feet with long legs and eyelashes above heart-shaped eyes. Again, a quirky eccentricity is executed with exceptional craft; the attention to detail and the exquisite control that every square centimeter has been fully realized with, gives the painting a seriousness, and intentionality that adds an uncanny depth to its presence, emanating a strange and delightful poetry.

About the painting "Bleeding Hearts", the artist said, "When I was a child I would sometimes hear my parents talking about bleeding hearts in reference to some political conversation. In my child's mind's eye, I would conjure up the most amusing images of what a bleeding heart would look like. In this painting I made my drips of blood from the bleeding hearts, and when the image at the bottom of the painting took on the look of water bird's feet, I was surprised and thought 'This is very odd, but I will just go with it'. I made the painting at the scale of a human face, or of a torso; the surface of the flesh colored field is dappled with my 'embankment' technique. This painting is one of my favorites in the show because it contains an enigma (the webbed feet). It's what the painting dictated and signifies something though its meaning is a mystery, a secret held as a result of allowing the painting to exert its own nature."

Painting is a form of alchemy; using ground minerals, seed oil, sticks and animal fur as tools we manifest novel universes in a metaphoric language of images. Our long shadows are still cast upon the walls of the Paleolithic caves of our ancestors, and stretch forward beyond the horizon of an unknown future.

We live in a media drenched world; the onslaught of images is a visual cacophony of information attempting to shape our beliefs and desires, instilling fear or longing. Within this maelstrom, artists seek to cull essential images; in order to fashion paintings that are arresting and hold consciousness in their spell. These are visions discovered by seekers willing to release the reins of reason and to float through uncharted spaces and bring back a language pregnant with mystery.

The human desire to create language is an expression of our collective need to belong and to share a cultural identity through the power of myth and metaphor. It is also a profound quest to try to understand our place in the universe and to accept the limits of our knowledge. This tension between the light of knowledge and the immense darkness that envelops us is a catalyst for our imagination. Our ideas shimmer in this darkness like the splash of stars across the Milky Way: embers of consciousness glowing for a brief moment.

Linda Stark is a visionary artist: these paintings are arrived at through an uncanny blend of sincerity and humor. The synthetic fusion of exquisite craft, high artifice, arcane symbols and pop imagery, coalescing into a singular gestalt, all structured through memory and a biographical symbolic narrative, is a feat of magic. The physicality of her surface treatment and the passages of relief, act upon our consciousness in subliminal rivers of arch humor, we see into the window of the artist's soul and playfully she reminds us of where we are standing and that we are being met with the gaze of a mysterious stranger.