

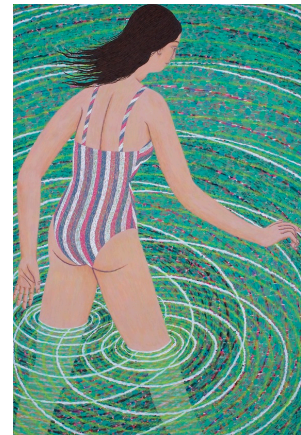
A Way from Home
Friday, November 22nd, 2013

I imagine Benjamin Degen's figures to be vacationers at a cabin upstate.

Perhaps they are a group of couples visiting for a long weekend, or maybe they scored a late-summer rental. They swim by day, drink at night, and cook hearty brunches the next morning. It's folksy and relaxing – no Decameron orgies, no Ken Kesey oblivion (but why not?).

In *Shadow, Ripple and Reflection*, his first solo show at Susan Inglett Gallery Degen gives us new paintings of figures that look life-size, built from impasto techniques that seem to weave fibers of pure color, while using hue and space to deliver glimpses of their internal states of mind. The paintings feel parsimonious in gesture, yet generous and ecstatic in material and spirit. He paints like a warmer, more indie Georges Seurat.

In the lush green *Lakeside* a woman wades into a lake, seemingly entranced by the surface ripples. There's no reflection, so it's not a Narcissus moment. Instead, it's a case of ego giving into pure sensations: the water ringing her thighs, the radiating ripples, the glistening colors on the surface – haptic, mechanical, retinal phenomena.



Meanwhile, the water seems to reach vertically as it expands deeply, blanketing the canvas and stuffing our minds.

In *Sea*, the same woman (I assume) strikes a surveying contraposto to look over the moonlit lake, her hair and diaphanous dress billowing in a night breeze. She clutches a beer bottle, while an empty one lays at her feet. Did her companion finish that beer, and then go for a dip? Is she looking for this companion in the water?

Or is she content to be alone, as in the magical moment during which she reclines with a book and a bottle of wine? In *Winding Leaves*, her pose is classical and time-tested, spanning Olympia to Demoiselles, but Degen bends her dappled body and grass to subsume volume, color, and position to the speckled and vibrant surface. And yet the blanket seems to have unfurled and levitated, like a magic carpet, perhaps a textile ship of the imagination.



Is it the same woman in Nostos (Greek for “homecoming”) who dashes through a door, keys in hand, shirt half-removed? The crackling, lurid colors seem to verify her adrenal state. The same might be true of the “turned-on” light switch. One can only imagine the narrative while combing the details and composition: the wall and shadow on the left, with the door and shadow on the right, create a near symmetrical proscenium; and the stray running sneaker seems to symmetrically balance the forward foot of this canvas-consuming fox.

The show reaches its symbolic zenith in Men. As from a Greek vase, or baton relay, or both, an utterly trippy sequence of male figures cascades across the picture, limbs superimposed and chromatically tangled. Save for the reiterated contours of their bodies, this work of radical figuration summons the starry sky to vaporize the male corporeal masses, rasterizing them as twinkling neural clusters. Likewise, a dozing reclining nude male in Night Wave seems transported to the constellations above, as if sleep is a tunnel to the cosmos.

