

Beer, Jonathan, "Benjamin Degen", BROOKLYN RAIL, 18 December 2013.



BENJAMIN DEGEN

by Jonathan Beer

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Shadow, Ripple, and Reflection is Benjamin Degen's debut solo show at Susan Inglett. It features eight paintings—all made in the last year—that are linked by their pictorial content and sensory ambition. At first glance Degen's canvases seem pastoral, bordering on cliché. His scenes of people retreating into nature are quiet and carefully constructed, bringing to mind the pared down and continually revised scenes of Matisse and Gauguin. They are populated by people who live a leisurely existence; free from the technological shackles of our world. The forest these figures inhabit is warm; perhaps it is always summer there. Clearly this is a place of leisure, and as Degen's characters demonstrate, it's perfect for swimming and reading in the grass.

This is where Degen's paintings begin, and as one goes deeper they become more strange and poetic. Upon approach it's clear that the people who populate Degen's forest are not quite solid. They swim or lounge in their underwear during the day, but at night they become spirits. It is as if these canvases depict their supernatural vacation.

Degen's technique and figurative scenes call to mind the work of Dana Schutz and George Seurat. He paints the fleeting and flickering play of light on an unfixed world. The people in Degen's paintings exhibit an ability to change shape and shed their normal corporeal form, exemplifying a spiritual union with nature. But that union with nature is only a leitmotif for Degen: he is after something much bigger and more sublime.

Works like "Nightwave" (2013) or "Moongazer" (2012) capture the total release felt outdoors and an accompanying awareness of the interlinked structure of the natural world. In "Nightwave," a nude, russet-color man lies outstretched on a blanket; eyes closed, an upturned book at his side. In the night sky above him a translucent blue man floats, posed as his mirror reflection. Stars shine through him and the larger stars over his hand, hip, shoulder, and foot clearly indicate he is a constellation incarnate. Degen has enhanced the sensory experience of the entire scene. The stars are no longer simply points of light but moments of texture constituting the body of a supernatural being. The sky itself, typically a seamless surface experienced primarily by the eyes, now begs to be touched.

On the topmost layer Degen has built up the paint into a web-like pattern, linking the entire surface of the picture together. Whether a person or a beam of light, all is connected. Although linked by a web of thick paint, each object's color gradually blends into its neighbor, enhancing the unified web of ropey paint. All at once we have a picture that demands to be both spatial and flat. It's as if he's making paintings for every sensory organ.

"Moongazer" employs similar devices. It is a close up of a similar scene; cropped to the two figures' heads. The red figure cracks one eye up at the moon, forming the eye of the blue face. The light rays emitted by each star are visible and tactile, freely interacting with those around it. This hyperactivated space communicates a special kind of sensitivity, and the physicality lends poetic description in a way that is more readily felt.

If these paintings were just images, the poetry of gazing into a starry night would be lost to sappiness and sentimentality. But in works like "Nightwave" and "Moongazer," Degen reproduces the sensory totality of such dreamy moments to a degree that sets off a complex and connected chain reaction, and ripples through the environment of the picture.