

Maine, Stephen, "Reviews: Featured Reviews," Artillery Magazine, January-February 2011.

NEW YORK

William Villalongo Susan Inglett Gallery



William Villalongo, *Why Can't We Be Friends*, 2010 Villalongo: COURTESY Susan Inglett Gallery

Plenty of painters have offered their take on the hybrid landscape that lies between abstraction and figuration, but few have done so with as much wit and weirdness as William Villalongo. In "Bathing Nymph," his sophomore solo at Inglett, the young artist envisions that region as a strange, mythical land of forests and streams where youthful, athletic women of various shades, wearing outlandish coiffures and little else, frolic and fight, romance and recreate, while inventing, perhaps, the now-familiar tropes of modernist abstraction.

Rhombus (75 x 58-inches; all works 2010) is painted on a panel the shape of a skewed rectangle, an Ellsworth-Kelly-like, 2-inch-thick support. In the foreground, a willowy, brown-skinned nymph applies carefully considered strokes of electric blue to a hot-red canvas even taller than her; in the distance, a fierce-looking comrade a few shades darker flings a pot of yellow paint at another work in progress. Two pink-skinned nymphs gambol in a nearby lake. Inexplicably, one wears a small gestural abstraction as a mask, peering through eyeholes cut in the canvas. Villalongo is a skilled draughtsman, and he knows his anatomy. His figures are acrylic-painted, precisely cut paper collage, economically rendered but so convincing in gesture and scale that they rarely seem to drift from their pictorial moorings. In all these works, a goofy/mysterious silhouette in black velvet flocking encloses the composition and suggests that the

viewer is hiding in the bushes-adding to the awesomeness of the scene and a certain voyeuristic *frisson*.

In only one work is the viewer found out. Proposing a reconciliation of narrative imagery and pure form, *Why Can't We Be Friends* depicts a leering mulatto, her Josef Albers *Hommage to the Square* headgear barely concealing her billowing afro, standing waist-deep in a lapping lagoon while a picturesque landscape unfolds in deep illusionistic space. The support itself is eccentrically shaped like a truncated pie-slice, emphasizing its objecthood. Toward the viewer she extends an olive branch, which echoes the Matisse-like botanical doodads that pepper this painting's velvet-flocked edges. Her gesture might suggest a truce between form and content, between object and illusion, or even between viewer and viewed. She's saying, "relax - I'm a picture, not a puzzle." But somehow you don't believe her.

At nearly 12-feet across, the fan-shaped Jubilee is the largest work and the exhibition's centerpiece. Atop their black, white and brown mounts, a trio of horsewomen (wearing, respectively, Gene Davis, Robert Ryman and Ad Reinhardt masks) surveys a bucolic landscape wherein naked nymphs scamper about, attending to each other's hair and testing the relative merits of gestural and geometric abstraction. It's Skowhegan as Sappho would imagine it.

10 more compact tableaux, each 2-feet square, provide additional clues to the habits of these nasty naiads. In *Tiger vs. Crane*, practitioners of two classic Kung Fu styles square off; shielding their faces are a Clyfford Still (the all-American tiger) and a Mark Rothko (the old-world crane). *BBQ By The Lake* finds the gals roasting some poor guy on a spit; a bat dangles upside-down in the foreground while an incongruously cheery rainbow glistens in the distance. In *The Curious Woman from Caucas*, a pink-skinned woman in camo helmet and veil has ridden down from the mountains on her black mare to check out her duskier sisters, who strike Art Nouveau poses in the sylvan setting. *Moon Dance* is pure heathen fun: under a radiant moon, a quartet of nubile nymphs gleefully gyrates while a fifth looks on, enchanted.

With subtle intelligence and abundant humor, Villalongo touches lightly on ideas about race, origin myths, art-historical miscegenation and the cultural value of artistic production. As long as he doesn't get carried away with his own cleverness, he will be great fun to watch.

- *Stephen Maine*