

Quinn Latimer

INDRA.
“Scents of Souls”

In Indra’s synthetic, Pop-inflected fantasias, dinosaurs pace pink- and purple-shadowed waterways, geishas move through forests bedecked with axolotls, old men and children wield butterfly nets against shimmering backdrops, and sleeping beauties levitate dreamily above their surreally small beds. In fact, nearly all of the German-born artist’s paintings picture or are predicated on acts of levitation. Her decorous, winsome figures hover in the middle of candy-color-strewn grounds that often have little real “ground” in them. The floating, spectral quality of Indra’s pictorial space might be the projection of her singular imagination, but it also originates from the very making of the works themselves.

The paintings feature a mix of imagery culled from both internet and analog research (libraries, museums, zoos), which the artist projects onto her canvases before then drawing and painting them in with marker, acrylic, and adept gradations of brilliantly hued spray paint. Children run wild through her works—their romantic and cartoonish figuration and erotics recalls Henry Darger’s own army of little girls, white ankle socks and all—as do geishas and a bestiary of animals: owls, bats, pigs, monkeys. Indra’s magpie method of collating and conflating myriad sources of familiar imagery enhances the Pop sensibility of the works. The figuration can be slickly emotive rather than psychological, making it somehow akin to commercial advertising. Yet, Indra’s sensual style also has a more literary and painterly lineage, with influences from William Blake’s “illuminated books” and etchings to French symbolist painters like Odilon Redon to the strange surrealism of Max Ernst.

At the same time, Indra’s paintings have a distinctly Asian sensibility, drawing on aspects of *Ukiyo-e*, the ancient Japanese idea of a flowing and perishable world (it literally translates to “pictures of a flowing world”), which requires that beings constantly undergo a process of growth and decay. *Ukiyo-e* is most familiar to Western audiences as employed in Japanese 17th-century woodblock prints, but it also deftly describes “Scents of Souls,” Indra’s newest exhibition of paintings at Tony Wuethrich Galerie, in Basel. The recent series of works (all were made between 2009 and 2011) picture a world where the dream-state of childhood is presented against an art history lesson in painting practices from the past few centuries. Backgrounds range from austere monochromes to geometric abstractions to neo-surreal figuration to *Ukiyo-e*-like patterns, all of which embody the idea that time is not exactly linear, not flowing in one direction only, but a whirlpool of once-specific gestures and practices.

In *O.T. (Fängerin)* (2011), for example, a small child of indeterminate gender in a pale, transparent nightgown holds up a butterfly net. The romantically clichéd figure is positioned against a color field of three bands of bright, flagrant color: magenta melding into rust orange into fluorescent green. In *O.T. (Pieta)* (2010), meanwhile, a mother and child rest against a hard-edged geometric abstraction built of spray-painted planes and streaking lines and vanishing points. Against this riotous yet rigid background, the child lays on its side while its mother suckles a young pig. It is to Indra’s great credit that the feeling this painting evokes is contemplatively pacific rather than sensational or torrid. Her other recent works strike a similarly somnambulant tone, which is so often at odds with the parade of flashy, day-glo coloration, complicated composition, and familiar figures and caricatures that she favors. Perhaps it’s this very paradox that Indra’s paintings—with their dreamy and demented admixture of European philosophy and Buddhist thought, Western art histories and Eastern art histories—are meant to conjure like a spell.

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