

Jo Ellen Van Ouwerkerk

Jo Ellen Van Ouwerkerk revisits nineteenth-century feminine icons in “Curious Sanctuary” (January 29–March 19, 2011), her latest exhibition at the Woodward Sanctuary. Her paintings, which explore the private fantasies of her offbeat heroines. Van Ouwerkerk draws on Pre-Raphaelite stunners, fin-de-siècle femme fatales and antique photographic erotica for her dramatis personae. In one of her earlier works, *Birds Flying Backwards* (oil-on-canvas, 1980–83), she replicates the figure of Jane Morris from one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s paintings, but adds a flock of ghostly birds—white with yellowish wings—that may embody the brooding beauty’s private thoughts. Van Ouwerkerk plays modern games with the visual culture of a previous era. This is the principle underlying Max Ernst’s surrealist collage novella *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934), with its over-upholstered graphic energy and bizarre hybrid creatures. Van Ouwerkerk’s strategy is more oblique: she restricts surreal eruptions to the details surrounding her portrait subjects.

Those details often carry a whiff of menace. In *Women in Piles of Wood Waiting to Burn* (acrylic-on-canvas, 2010), the tiny background figures, depicted in a naïve style, prepare to burn someone at the stake. Yet the woman in the foreground, who has the glamour of a 1920s movie star, seems unconcerned; the ritual as performed by the toy-town sisterhood is curiously unthreatening. The mood of becalmed oddity continues in another 2010 acrylic, *She Loved Her Hat but Her Body Was Made of Moths*, where the protagonist, a flapper-type posed against striped wallpaper, nonchalantly models her hat, ignoring the delicate winged swarm emerging from her dress.

Van Ouwerkerk often employs a distinct muted palette that suggests hand-tinted photographs from the turn of the twentieth century. A number of contemporary artists, including Brad Reuben Kunkle, are also playing with photographic conventions, not to mimic some hypothetical straightforward realism but to engage in the ongoing dialogue about the nature of representation. The history of photography includes many different ways of looking. The bare-breasted woman in Van Ouwerkerk’s *Girl with Black Mask in a Red Room* (acrylic, 2005), painted realistically in monochrome, looks like a figure cut out from a period photograph, silhouetted against a flat scarlet backdrop. The handmade metal frame, embossed with folk-art skeletons, adds to the fetishistic wit of the ensemble. Van Ouwerkerk employs an interesting technique, drawing with graphite and charcoal on the canvas, overpainting in acrylic and occasionally using an airbrush. The results can be texturally seductive, as in *She Tried to Hide the Lizards in Her Hair* (2010). The model folds her hands in a gesture of Victorian rhetorical piety, her grisaille skin has a luminous sheen, and her shadowy eyes are eloquently piercing. But the green lizards that emerge from her luxuriant hair hint at dangerous mischief in her private thoughts. The lizards are painted in a different, looser style, and their green color works thematically to suggest the simultaneous presence of different realities.

The women in these paintings have exaggerated eyes that suggest an altered state of consciousness, and perhaps the influence of the eccentric

Jo Ellen Van
Ouwerkerk
*She Listened to the Bird
Sing Until Bees Came
Out of Its Mouth*, 2011
COURTESY WOODWARD
GALLERY,
NEW YORK CITY



Ukrainian-American painter John Graham (1886–1961). The eyes of Graham’s voluptuous models are preternaturally large and sometimes even crossed. Van Ouwerkerk’s *She Listened to the Bird Sing Until Bees Came Out of Its Mouth* (acrylic, 2011) has a similar sibylline vibe. The model with otherworldly eyes and an elaborately draped gown is a bare-shouldered prophetess, alluring and tranced-out. The figure is silhouetted against a flat mint-green backdrop, and it takes a moment to find the skeleton sprite of a bird that inspires her. Sometimes old master-style frames add another art historical layer, as in the more whimsical *She Hears the Girls Whispering* (acrylic, 2008), where the backdrop is a yellow-brick, barrel-vaulted space with doll-like miniature figures clinging to the walls and ceiling. The protagonist in the foreground has a chic, contemporary look. The grisaille of her skin tones looks attractive against the soft copper of her pleated chiffon dress, decorated with a sage green rose. Figurative art is a capacious category, and there are many ways to negotiate the passage from external appearance to subjective life. Working in the honorable tradition of eccentric representation, Van Ouwerkerk has taken on the history of woman-as-subject for a series of aesthetically appealing, provocative and personal paintings. Woodward Gallery, 133 Eldridge Street, New York, New York 10002. Telephone (212) 966-3411. On the web at www.WoodwardGallery.net