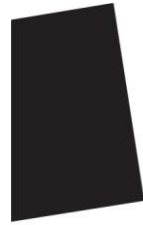


Melissa Marks: COMMA 11

Essay by Susan Greenberg Fisher



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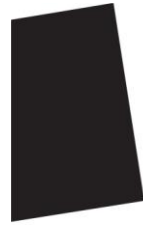
Ripe

Paradise is a timeless ideal. It is a state or a place of contentment, harmony, and delight. In the book of Genesis, Paradise is the Garden of Eden, an enclosed, idyllic landscape where God created Adam and Eve. Their ejection from Eden, the Expulsion from Paradise, was accompanied by a painful psychic transformation from happiness to difficult self-awareness. The Expulsion was monumental in its tragedy. God even put a guard at Eden's gate to prevent their re-entry.

The psychic movement in and out of the paradisiacal experience is the subtext of *Adventures of Volitia: Expulsion from Paradise*, the current installation in Bloomberg SPACE by New York based artist Melissa Marks. Marks has chosen the Expulsion story as the organising narrative for the latest adventures of Volitia, an invented female character and alter-ego who has been the central protagonist of the artist's work since the early 1990s. The name Volitia comes from the word volition or "the act of making a choice or decision." Volitia's actions are not determined by some larger power but through her own choice and desires.

For this installment of Volitia's adventures, our heroine isn't driven out of Paradise; paradoxically, she is simply bored there and wants to "get THE HELL OUT," as Marks writes in her description of the project. "I never actually 'fell' out of Eden. I wasn't kicked out either" we are told. Volitia's subsequent journey is full of fits and starts, detours and U-turns, but it is of her choosing. Marks recounts: "Expulsion wasn't smooth, no one-way-ticket out." Volitia is born in the moment of Expulsion, for hereafter, she can act through her own free will and inhabit a world of her own making: "She began with a declaration of freedom, an attempt to live the idea of a self in constant state of remaking."

Perhaps this is why Volitia takes the form not of a person in Marks's imaginary world, but instead a state of embryonic formlessness. She is a mutable pink-and-white blob, like a cartoonish blown-up drip from a Jackson Pollock painting. Volitia is also hard to see in Marks's imagery, often resembling the rounded organic forms of the surrounding landscape—like Marks's signature flowering blossoms and bulbous blue ice formations—and merging with her backdrop to create a type of visual ooze analogous to a stream of consciousness. Sometimes she multiplies into several Volitias, who move around together like a school of fish. Unlike the showy male



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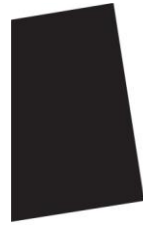
protagonists of traditional adventure tales—such as Superman with his red cape or Pinocchio with his long nose—Volitia is an elusive figure.

As an errant drip, a by-product of Abstract Expressionism, Volitia is also a comment on the tradition of post-war American painting. Marks's decision to create her artistic alter-ego out of the residue of this notoriously masculine tradition enables her, through Volitia, to manoeuvre between its chauvinistic yet undeniable brilliance and her own contemporary practice. Marks reflects how "The drawn mark, or line, has been given superhero status and attributes, and yet, remains a basic reductive element—an anchor and building block with the power to elaborate fantasy." Through Volitia, Marks feminizes the masculine mark, perhaps implying that Abstract Expressionism, as historically described by its critics and creators, is more feminine than we have come to understand it.

Marks's visualisation in *Expulsion from Paradise* of the crucial moment when Volitia transitions from passive to active makes this particular installation a key installment in the "adventure" series. In Marks's earlier installments, Volitia's pursuits have already begun, starting in 1997 with *Volitia Bounces Off The Wall* (Art in General, New York City), followed by *Heroic Burlesque* in 1998 (solo exhibition at The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut), *What is My Charisma?* in 1999 (solo installation at Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York City), and *The Sorcerer's Swimming Pool* (P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York). Marks's additional installations in numerous group shows across Europe and the United States featured Volitia in *Battle Scenes* (2000) and *Water Scenes* (2001); followed by *Volitia Sees The Future* (2004), *Volitia Considers A Difficult Crossing* (2005), *Volitia Causes Meltwater*, *Volitia Uncorks The Glacier's Tongue*, and *Volitia Experiments With Latent Heat* (all 2006). Volitia sees, considers, causes, uncorks, and experiments; in the current installation at Bloomberg SPACE, however, Volitia begins. Marks's ongoing project of a non-linear, invented narrative featuring Volitia invites comparison to a number of contemporary artists who share her interest in this non-traditional approach to storytelling, including Matthew Barney and Ernesto Caivano.

In Bloomberg SPACE, Volitia's adventure plays out in an immersive environment of 11 colourpencil drawings, each comprised of a varying number of 17 x 11 inch sheets, which hover around the balcony of the building. In conversation with these colour drawings is a monumental, two-storey wall painting, done in black acrylic and drained of colour. The oversized, turbulent wall imagery rises and falls in a full-on baroque mode, while the horizontal colour drawings enclose us in a petal-pink world. The landscape motifs of these drawings recall the beautiful realm of Japanese woodblock prints or *ukiyo-e* ("pictures of the floating world"), beloved by Impressionists like Vincent van Gogh and especially Claude Monet, whose own immersive *Water Lilies* serve as the ghost of Marks's installation.

Both the colour drawings and the wall painting feature Volitia(s) moving within an imaginary landscape, yet diverge by offering up to the visitor two modes of viewing: the communal, shared experience of standing before a largescale cartoon, as if in a Renaissance church or in front of a



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graffitied building on a city street, and the closer act of “reading” the sequence of colour drawings. Marks encourages this act of reading by appropriating for the colour pictures the conventions of the comic book, alternating between the long shot (using 7 or 9 sheets of paper), the close-up (3 sheets), and the extreme close-up (2 sheets). There is also a third zone in the installation where the wall painting and colour drawings overlap, mingling the categories of drawing and painting, colour and line, beautiful and sublime.

At the very centre of a long colour drawing, Volitia, now surrounded by a creeping blue ice formation at left and an elaborately embellished, orange tree on the right, does a double take. She spins to the left and to the right, unsure of which direction to travel. It is a cartoonish, funny moment, like the whirling Tasmanian Devil. It is also the installation’s *punctum*, or its core. For Volitia, life outside of Paradise is more interesting, despite its uncertainties and contradictions.

Susan Greenberg Fisher

Susan Greenberg Fisher is Executive Director of the Chaim Gross Foundation in New York City. She was until recently the Horace W. Goldsmith Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut.