

Elizabeth Malaska
Heavenly Bodies

ASHLEY STULL MEYERS

THE HISTORY OF PAINTING THE FEMALE FORM is fraught with inappropriately weighted gaze, limited considerations of the subjects' autonomy, and a posturing about gender and sexuality that raises precious few instances of the nuance its subjects deserve. The boundaries between tenderness and wishful objectification, realism and a documentary coldness, often seem to be difficult to navigate with evenhanded cleverness and care. But the paintings and drawings of artist Elizabeth Malaska reframe discussions of how to represent the female form through a keen understanding of figurative and iconographic complexity. Well-placed signifiers of women's labor and leisure alike elevate her renderings to a thoughtful construction of her subjects' rich inner lives and motivations.

Aspiring to the legacies of artists such as Jay DeFeo and Carolee Schneemann, Malaska paints female bodies that are wholly other, occupying a space that is of their own supposed imagination and development. The figures, casually revealed more than boldly exposed, generate a surface that dimensionally supports a plane of the unreal. Their bodies are containers for not merely a biological specificity, but for defiant autonomy and a nonchalant insistence on their additional value. Their mental states—aspirations, desires, and prideful confidences—are evidenced in the abundance of contemporary iconography Malaska expertly positions.

Within *Apocrypha*, a woman clad only in briefs and tube-socks lounges in the traditional pose of an odalisque, outstretched among a selection of potted plants, pillows, and other creature comforts. Her gaze is offset, a refusal to accept or acknowledge the viewer's imposition. She's unbothered—preoccupied—within a landscape she's taken great care to construct. She settles there, not unable but unwilling to assume any other form than that which she has chosen. Her narrative in this moment, her "apocrypha," is ancillary to that which is commonplace to public consumption.

In *Form and Void*, two forms—one animate and one whose dimensionality is more ambiguous—are situated within a playground of art historical and contemporary references. Golden orbs, frayed rope, and ornately patterned wall portraits all suggest Renaissance-like sensibilities. All the while the painting's

interior modeling, wooden flooring, and youthful fixation with “selfie” culture champion a modern perspective on aspirational living. The Renaissance era of female makership was one of resourcefulness, forward thinking, and measured provocation. The ingenuity required to enter physical and occupational spaces in which femaleness is antagonized is the inceptive ideology within which women still make, and within which Malaska takes full advantage.

Lament is a deeply sympathetic portrait of female grief, frustration, and self-comfort. Surrounded again by the pleasures of plants and cats (a symbol that has resurfaced in contemporary political rhetoric), the figure meets the viewer’s gaze this time. A cigarette in one hand, a joint in the other, she’s confidently centered in both anecdote and composition. Her solitude feels essential but isn’t communicating loneliness or a peripheral relationship to the rest of the universe she occupies—this is a self-imposed exile. She has created a nest of comfort within which she cannot be disturbed. The various markers of freedom and stability Malaska establishes here convey both emotion and vulnerability, but not weakness. Her posture and command are entitled in ways that more portraiture of female bodies should possess, and with an appropriately penetrable interior life that many artists struggle to render.

Elizabeth Malaska’s visual index ranges from Matisse to the textiles made under the subversive guise of 1970s “women’s work.” Though she names many contemporary feminist influences, her work embodies an uncanny marriage between Sylvia Sleigh and Marlene Dumas. The figures she champions are stargazers in both title and sentiment—unafraid to either dream or weep. The bodies she paints are heavenly in both politic and potential.

ASHLEY STULL MEYERS is a writer, editor and curatorial collaborator. She has curated exhibitions and programming for the Wattis Institute (San Francisco), Eli Ridgway (San Francisco), the Oakland Museum of California, Newspace Center for Photography (Portland, OR), and Bridge Productions (Seattle, WA). She has been in academic residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE) and the Banff Centre (Banff, Alberta). Most recently, Stull Meyers has been an adjunct lecturer at Wichita State University (Wichita, KS) and has served as the Outreach Coordinator for the Artist in Residency program at c3:initiative. She is currently Northwest Editor for Art Practical, and has contributing writing to Bomb Magazine, Rhizome, Arts.Black and SFAQ/NYAQ.

In October 2017 Stull Meyers was named Director and Curator of the Art Gym and Belluschi Pavilion at Marylhurst University (Lake Oswego, OR).