

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS LOS ANGELES

Alexa Guariglia

By Andrew Berardini | June 1, 2019

The lanky ladies in Alexa Guariglia's paintings hover in swirling blossoms of color, caught either in the act of artmaking or aswim in paper or water. Their lithe contours seem to have been recorded with a single swipe of the artist's brush, as in the elongated bodies of illustrated fashion models. Ensnared in writhing vegetation and clad in frenetic patterns, the figures look wholly lost in their own worlds: Stacks of canvases brick in their makers; arms knead a misshapen hunk of clay; faces bend toward paintings as if entranced by magical mirrors. The portraits' easy lyricism and diaphanous charm are largely indebted to their materials—washes of gouache and watercolor, flourishes of ink.

In Guariglia's recent exhibition "Sink or Swim," watery metaphors abounded in works' titles. Take *Poseidon's Concubine* (all works cited, 2019) or *Helike*, which invoked the name of an ancient Greek city swallowed by the sea one fine day in 373 BCE. The subject matter extended the theme: *A Good Swim* involved a naked woman backstroking in paper rather than in the wet stuff, while *Lucid Inescapable Rhythms* showed a body floating on actual waves beneath a black storm cloud.

Almost all of these women existed alone within the compositions (Guariglia pointed to this fact directly in the work title *No Companion Like Solitude I*), and their lonesomeness seemed to be of their own making. When examining works such as *Helike*, where a figure was almost lost in a whirlwind of papery pictures, or *Shangri La*, where the aforementioned woman was enclosed in her own work, one wondered if the latter title described a state of bliss or the irony of feeling trapped in one's own dreams. The expressions on the simply drawn women's faces were often of self-satisfaction, a lotus eater's repose.

At work in these interior worlds, Guariglia doesn't dip one of those long fingers into the twenty-first century. Her overall style invokes the writhing vines and florals of Art Nouveau, complemented by Victorian cameos winking from flocked wallpaper. The elegant bodies are more Mannerist or Pre-Raphaelite than modern (though more loose and expressive than art of those movements).

What does it mean to escape into anachronism, a world of one's own making without reference to the present? The most visually complex work in the exhibition, *The Lionized Crumb (The Things We Are)*, was also the most interior: A central female figure contained dozens of smaller scenes of graceful women bending and turning to fit into the interlocking geometry of a single body unfolding in space. Here was a woman who, like Walt Whitman, contained multitudes. This tessellated withdrawal, refracted throughout the show in vaguely sentimental prettiness, was compelling in its gossamer fantasies, suggestive of a dreamy sphere devoid of any trace of conflict. But where was the dark shadow these women were retreating from? I felt lost in a closet of beautiful old dresses—silky, beautiful, and never to be worn again.



Alexa Guariglia, *The Lionized Crumb (The Things We Are)*, 2019, gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper, 60 x 45 1/2