



# Elizabeth Huey: The Infinite Container of the Imagination

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by Gabrielle Selz

A mix of the haunting and the sublime, the bucolic and perverse, “Radiant Swim,” an exhibition of new work by artist Elizabeth Huey, is a powerful investigation of the communal experience of water. Curated by Jess Frost and on view at Harper’s Books until Feb. 23, the show of seventeen paintings and two works of collage is both an oasis and an encounter with the alternate reality that infuses the mind of this talented artist.

The history of psychology has long informed both Huey’s paintings and her life. She makes no secret of the fact that she was confined in an institution for two years when she was a wayward adolescent. Later, before she turned to art, she received a degree in psychology. Still, the mind and the treatment of its ailments, has long been her subject.

In this new body of work, Huey replaces sanitariums and institutions with resort spas, treatment centers and secluded getaways. Water—as ritualistic bath, as gathering place, medicinal salve, playground, reflecting surface and, specifically, water as the dreamlike soup where images gather and cavort—permeates the stage sets upon which Huey enacts her disjointed narratives. Where once her scenes were performed amid Gothic architecture, now they unfold in the brightly lit, idyllic—though sometimes also menacing—landscapes of the affluent.



“Sauna Domes” by Elizabeth Huey, 2013. Acrylic and oil on wood. 20 x 24 inches. Photo by Susan Alzner.

[Huey](#) sources her paintings from historic images, advertisements, postcards and photographs, and curator Jess Frost has included a selection of both found and created materials as well as collages that reference the process Huey uses in creating her phantasmagorias.

Collage works, like *Moved by a Bonewhite Light*, are integral to her method. Huey calls them premonitions, for in them we see a transitional moment in which a number of the gothic figures from her “Asylum” series and a turquoise blue puddle are situated against brighter terrain. As her series develops, these forms will reappear in varying guises. The puddle will become a swimming pool, the yellow background will morph into desert landscape, and the naked silhouettes will gain full definition.



“Moved by a Bonewhite Light” by Elizabeth Huey, 2013. Acrylic, collage and pencil on paper, 16 x 20 inches. Photo by Susan Alzner.

Familiar features—humans, landscape, architecture—populate Huey’s world. But in Huey’s universe, benign elements often take on distorted proportions. Buildings loom, landscape is sculpted, colors are florid, light is neon; even her perspective, with the horizon-line high on the canvas, gives Huey’s scenes a vast, tilting, off-kilter expansiveness.



“Violet Moonrise” by Elizabeth Huey, 2013. Acrylic and oil on wood. 36 x 36 inches. Photo by Susan Alzner.

Applied on wood panels, Huey’s brushwork, like her vision, is a combination of rough and even surfaces. Working with brushes and knives, she creates backgrounds that are heavy impastos against which her flatter figures frolic, rest and recover.

The themes and subject matter that continue to dominate Huey’s work are often a juxtaposition of opposites: architectural and organic, freedom and restraint, real and imaginary. In the painting, *Haven for the Tender Hearted*, a giant blowup clown looms over the scene like a wacky, creepy divinity. Below, bathers mingle with figures dressed as Quakers. In the center, a longhaired man in a blue robe—Jesus?—holds his arms out like a crucifix. In the realm of art, all disparities can coexist.



“Haven for the Tender Hearted” by Elizabeth Huey, 2013. Acrylic and oil on canvas. 30 x 40 inches. Photo by Susan Alzner.

The canvas (in Huey’s case the wood panel) is itself a constraint. And like the pools of water that dominate these paintings, it is a rich and variable container, a place of mystery and regeneration.

Huey has said that while she was confined as an adolescent, she was forced to sit in a blue plastic chair for 10 hours a day, but her mind was her own and free to wander. In these paintings the blue chair has morphed into luminous pools of water, but it is still a container, a smaller canvas within the larger painting within which Huey’s dreams have true freedom.

In *Observation Pool*, that water has swallowed up the view and become the entire backdrop.

Densely painted in abstract brushwork, this body of water behind which her clad figures conduct their daily lives depicts a place where figures float and dance in the infinity of our imaginations.



“Observation Pool” by Elizabeth Huey, 2013. Acrylic and oil on wood. 18 x 24 inches. Photo by Susan Alzner.

For Huey painting is an open exploration where she can intermingle the terrains of the interior world of impulse and fantasy with the exterior world of form and architecture. When we look at her work, we too, are exposed to the shifting moments when the actual and the intangible meet in the realm of art.

**BASIC FACTS: “Elizabeth Huey: Radiant Swim”** was extended until Feb. 23 at Harper’s Books, 87 Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. The gallery is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and on Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. [www.harpersbooks.com](http://www.harpersbooks.com).

Huey is also an accomplished photographer. Harper’s Books will exhibit a selection of her photographic work at the [Los Angeles Art Book Fair](#) from Jan. 31 to Feb. 2, 2014.

EDITOR’S NOTE: The original story cited an exhibition end date of Feb. 16, 2014. The story was updated to reflect the extension date of Feb. 23, 2014.

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