



ART REVIEW: A “Midsummer Night’s Dream” of an Exhibition

July 8, 2014

by Janet Goleas

William Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is surely the most beguiling of his plays, filled with fairies and magic and the infinite complications of love. In “Judith Hudson: A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” on view at Tripoli Gallery in Southampton through July 13, 2014 a sense of jubilation and artistic reinvention informs new works on paper, inspired by the entrancing 16th century narrative.

Hudson is well known for sumptuous abstractions that have been exhibited widely over some four decades. But the artist suffered something of a conversion in 2008, emerging with a wholly new body of work driven by a narrative specifically (sometimes very specifically) about sex. Yes, that kind of sex.

Wickedly funny, the paintings meandered through racy escapades, often amplified by hand-painted text in the form of questions and answers. For those who have followed Hudson’s work over the years, it was a delicious anomaly that allowed her luscious brushwork and wink-wink sense of humor to flourish. Now she has taken things a giant leap further in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” borrowing all the felicity and poetry of Shakespeare’s comic drama and weaving it into euphoric visual narratives that are all her own.

Hudson’s Nick Bottom, the character who is given the head of an ass by Puck, the eternal prankster, is a frolicking donkey who maintains the theatrical conceit of being blithely unaware of his predicament here. He scratches his back on dewy grass or wriggles in clover, depicted with splashy, masterful brushwork and the artist’s natural flare for the anatomy. Further compounding Bottom’s dilemma, the cheeky Hudson has also turned him into a polyester throw rug that visitors tromp across on a daily basis.

.



“A Midsummer Night’s Dream Series: ‘An exposition of sleep came upon me’” by Judith Hudson, 2014. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 x 14 inches.

.



"A Midsummer Night's Dream Series: 'I know a bank where the wild thyme blows'" by Judith Hudson, 2014. Polyester rug with rubber backing, 43 x 59 inches. Edition of 10.

By now you could be excused for gassing up the car to make haste to the gallery -but wait, there's more. Two paintings - one of Frankenstein, the other of King Kong - hover overhead in the corner of a tall mezzanine. Accommodating artwork for the first time, the towering installation is an effective homage to Shakespeare's Globe Theater, where audience members enjoyed tiered seating that hugged the open stage.



"Unrequited Love Series: 'King King'" by Judith Hudson, 2013. Watercolor on paper, 40 x 26 inches.

Inspired by the plot line's elaborate layering of connective tissue, artists ranging from Felix Mendelssohn to Woody Allen have interpreted "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and, like them, Hudson moves in and out of Shakespeare's plot twists and narrative elements taking saucy artistic license. She portrays the rascally Puck as a clown, taking various shapes from a slightly overbaked harlequin to the downright Mephistophelian, with oozing makeup and wincing, furtive eyes.

In contrast, a suite of delicate motifs place the human form amid a natural world that is gossamer and fairy-like, with round, naked bottoms and an array of wilderness creatures. In *Where the bee sucks*, fully two-thirds of the image field is filled with buttocks over which an oversize bee hovers. Hudson's use of watercolor is employed to full impact here, with gushy, fluid expanses of pigment that flow from edge to edge.



"Shake a Tail Feather, Ike Turner" by Judith Hudson, 2014. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 x 14 inches.

She paints on handmade paper with an organic quality and so irregular in shape that its presence is almost sculptural. In small works that examine intimacy and the human touch, the paper plays a role in figuration, with body parts clustered inside. At the far edge of the paper sheet in *Touch 3*, a gentle torso culminates in a single nipple at the top. The painting squints to an end here, with that

lone nipple poised at a rippled corner of the paper field.



"Touch 3" by Judith Hudson, 2014. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 x 14 inches.



"Touch 1" by Judith Hudson, 2014. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 x 14 inches.



"Touch 4" by Judith Hudson, 2014. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 x 14 inches.

Similarly, in *Freckle I* and *Freckle II*, Hudson zooms in on the human form, examining the quality of skin and its modulations in pigment, texture and form. The paper, thick and amorphous, seems like another skin altogether and it works in concert with the imagery to canny effect.



"Freckle I" by Judith Hudson, 2014. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 x 14 inches.

In larger works, Hudson takes full advantage of Shakespeare's slippery narrative, moving between thoughts in dreamy monologues. '*I will roar you as 'twere any nightingale*,' places the long tongue of Snug's lion along the backside of a sleeping princess. As if he were not at all worried about learning his lines, he trifles away stroking her bum, out of which a tall flower grows.



"A Midsummer Night's Dream: '*I will roar you as twere any nightingale*' by

Judith Hudson, 2013. Watercolor on handmade paper, 26 x 40 inches.

But nowhere is the artist's sense of breadth and irony more present than in the small painting, *In the night imagining some fear*. Here, a dozing bear lies across the nude torso of a princess. Out of scale, one is pressed to wonder if the bear is unusually small or the princess is remarkably huge. As a lazy summer sun blazes over their shared sleepiness, the commingling of flesh and fur offers a kind of sonnet that is ironic, whimsical and a little bit magical.



"A Midsummer Night's Dream Series: 'In the night imagining some fear'" by Judith Hudson, 2014. Watercolor on handmade paper, 14 x 14 inches.

BASIC FACTS: "Judith Hudson: A Midsummer Night's Dream" is on view from June 21 to July 13, 2014 at Tripoli Gallery of Contemporary Art, 30 Jobs Lane, Southampton, NY 11968. www.tripoligallery.com

Copyright 2014 Hamptons Art Hub LLC. All rights reserved.