

MAJA RUZNIC

Matthew Bourbon, Review: Maja Ruznic, Conduit Gallery, Artforum, July 2020, p. 153-154



Torkwase Dyson, *Way Over There Inside Me (Ocean as a Super Throughway #1-4)*, 2020, four panels, graphite, acrylic, charcoal, and ink on canvas, each 40 x 30". From the series "Black Compositional Thought: 15 Paintings for the Plantationocene," 2020.

In a particularly distinctive pair of works jointly titled *Interstitial Being (Architecture and Flesh #13, 14)* (all works 2020), deep-charcoal-colored washes with subtle blue undertones made up the backgrounds, while three large black forms slightly overlapped to create one collaged shape in the foregrounds. The shapes seemed to cover fine white lines that appeared briefly, like accents in Dyson's vocabulary. Each individual shape was roughly triangular, but with rounded edges, resembling a boat's sail. While one of the three forms on each canvas had a smooth finish, the remaining two were created from layers of thick black paint. The gallery lights, bouncing off the paintings, highlighted their rich textures and gave them a sheen evoking that of petroleum.

Dyson created this series specifically for the New Orleans Museum of Art, located within City Park, the site of a former plantation. Theorists have begun using the show's titular term *Plantationocene* to emphasize that our era emerged from the exploitative logics of plantations and enslavement. Seen through this lens, several of Dyson's compositional elements signify differently: In two other groupings of paintings connected by their blue hues, for example—*Way Over There Inside Me (Ocean as a Super Throughway #1-4)* and *Way Over There Inside Me (Ocean as a Super Throughway #5-10)*—the organic flow of the wash and its dark-blue tones evoked the spirits of oceans, rivers, lakes, rain. Drips that trickled down and around the sides of the canvases created small passageways that reminded me of New Orleans's storied history with water: The Mississippi River once carried enslaved people to the city's port, and the region's destructive floods and heavy downpours continue to unequally impact the city's Black population due to the government-driven practices of segregation and redlining.

These associations connect to the other part of the show's title, "Black Compositional Thought," which is Dyson's own "working term" for a consideration of "how waterways, architecture, objects, and geographies are composed and inhabited by black bodies." Throughout earlier series, Dyson built a language of shapes that are abstract but that also reference moments in history when enslaved people skillfully used built structures or invented new ones to reach liberation. Here, the ninety-degree angle, curve, and irregular triangle all reappeared, symbolizing the stories of Henry "Box" Brown, Anthony Burns, and Harriet Jacobs, who hid in a shipping crate, a ship's hull, and the crawl space under a roof, respectively.

Dyson's material choices also brought to mind the relationship between environmental justice and the legacy of plantations. When I caught the oily sheen of the black shapes in *Interstitial Being (Architecture and Flesh #13, 14)*, I could not help but think of St. James Parish—the site of the Freetown settlement, founded in 1872 by formerly enslaved people—which is now a Black community crowded with

chemical, oil, and manufacturing plants in a stretch of Louisiana neighborhoods known as Cancer Alley.

Although Dyson's works might draw connections to these bitter histories, they do not evoke the grief that comes with them. Her calculated forms and pointed lines instead come across as severe. But the details of her works also convey an expansiveness, a sense of anticipated movement: Dyson's melds of overwhelmingly precise delineations with fluid grounds, sometimes punctuated by arrow-like forms, seem to be encrypted guides to a way out of the boundless tumbling problems of the Plantationocene. Or maybe her work merely reminds us of the possibility that such a path might exist.

—Erica Rawles

DALLAS

Maja Ruznic CONDUIT GALLERY

Everything appears to be in a state of constant and inevitable change in the exquisite paintings of Maja Ruznic. A range of mark-making methodologies leaves the images wraithlike, insinuating echoes of ideas. Ruznic stains her works with Gamsol-saturated pigment such that nebulous pools of paint fade in and out, sometimes disappearing into the weave of the canvas. The look is reminiscent of a watercolor bloom. The artist does not, however, rely on this procedure; it is only a beginning. She then examines the results of her incidental color placements and nimbly pulls forms from the foggy washes. The paintings come alive with the assuredness of her hand drawing figures out of the canvas, outlining a foot or a rudimentary face.

In loose, dreamy groupings, Ruznic's aqueous humans overlap, sit side by side, or diaphanously mesh into singular beings. Most appear to be women. In *Inheritance II* (all works 2019), the narrative seemed more direct than in many of the other works that were on view in this exhibition: The central figures appear to be a mother and daughter. The girl, in the foreground, is languorously posed at what resembles the foot of a bed in a position suggestive of a benign presexualized odalisque. The mother reaches downward to tenderly touch her child. Though the interaction is depicted clearly, its implications remain open-ended. Is the daughter or the mother ill, or are both merely resting? Complicating this interpretation are the awkward, disembodied doll-like feet (a specter's?) that walk on the back of the matriarch. One can imagine the mother reaching out her hand in an impossibly hopeful act meant to share a generational accumulation of knowledge, history, or familial love. Whatever Ruznic's intent, this painting is a poignant



Maja Ruznic, *Truth Seekers*, 2019, oil on canvas, 70 × 60".

evocation of affection, rare in contemporary art.

In the large, complicated painting *The Waiters*, several figures stand upright in a jumbled procession. Suffering seems to be the theme. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, comes to mind, conjured by a tilted head moaning a painful lament. Because Ruznic was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1983 and emigrated to the US in 1995, it is not difficult to frame these paintings as rediscoveries and transformations of an elusive and painful past, the artist's dreamlike means of finding rapport with the people of her birth country—or perhaps these canvases memorialize those women who might otherwise be lost to historical neglect or cultural forgetfulness more broadly.

In *Truth Seekers*, a trio of spectral women are rendered as visionary scientists or shamanistic medicine workers tapping into nature to unleash some internal power. Light bounces around the world of the canvas—populated by plants and mountains—such that the transparent figures seem to subsume everything around them directly into their bodies. This could be a religious painting for the irreligious: Three wise women show that we are part and parcel of the world. The piece functions as a healing balm in the face of the desolation that Ruznic's art often embodies—especially in her more dire-looking black-and-white drawings.

In *Search of New Hope* served as a bookend: Several boneless, stretchy characters are arranged in a circle suggesting a family; a central woman stands, holding a monkey-like baby. Huddled in a mass of muted ochers, the figures look to have been cut from the same cloth. By overlapping and integrating their forms, Ruznic points to our inability to exist in isolation and to our inexorable debts to each other. Armed with that knowledge, the painting's title implies, we might gain “new hope” with which to reinvigorate our lives.

—Matthew Bourbon

Pruning a tree ensures bounty, as does nixing a press release for a show. Having fettered the art world's temptation to indulge in aureate institutional babble (though we cynically admit that “the poetic” can be leveraged as its own breed of jargon), DeVito, even with the title of her show, freed us to play louche games of association, inching closer to the “erotics of art” for which Susan Sontag rallied.

Who *wouldn't* want to peek at an effort to marry the soothing hostage situations of the theater and the aquarium? Importantly, DeVito's hook is followed by a chorus: Marine blues, greens, and purples wash across her canvases, their movement caught in its weave. She massages the paint into the supporting fabric, relishing the creamy smooch of oils with the touch of a cinematographer. The frames, too, shirk neatness.

Father Gin, 2019, a chaotic spray of leaves and bruise-colored flora, and *Mediterranean Ouboros*, 2020, a softer aquatic image, are framed in ash wood with wonky edges that hug the pictures' unwieldy lines. The gallery assistant pointed out that these custom constructions were actually modeled on the curves of a guitar—another invocation of performance hovering around the painting.

Other frames were fabricated askew to accommodate works on loose cotton painter's cloths (*Mid-City Romance* and *Mother of Curls*, both 2019) and on hard panels cut to resemble dropped fabric. The conventionally framed works suffered by comparison;

luckily, these numbered only a few. My favorite painting didn't have a frame at all: *Machiavelli Heart Break*, 2019, is a painter's cloth folded into quarters and crawling with iconography of devilish midcentury delights—playing-card suits, a martini olive—even as the overall effect remains pastoral. The cotton seems to hold the paint even more brightly than the canvas. A vivid little stain of a heart rises from the hazy greenery. It's upside down.

A mentor and clown teacher (my nonperformer days are behind me, thank God) once explained to me the appeal of physical comedy in terms of erotics: “As a performer, you want to create just enough of an image for the audience to dream around you.” The paintings in “Motion Picture Seaweed” were just enough, each one a little cosmology of fuzzy signs that invited interpretation, sure, but also imagination—which, unlike the former, you can't do wrong.



Gracie DeVito, *Machiavelli Heart Break*, 2019, oil on cotton, 15½ × 14¼".

—Christina Catherine Martinez