

The Paintings of Judith Linhares and Vera Illiatova: Constructs of Representation

Judith Linhares' gloriously colorful figurative paintings almost always picture adult women, relaxing or working, often naked, in the out of doors. Vera Illiatova's paintings are interiors painted in a subtly nuanced greyed palette, a room with a lovely view inhabited by young women in their late teens or early twenties, reading, painting, meditating and conversing, clothed in skirts, dresses, sweaters and smocks. Instead of stories, Linhares' and Illiatova's works are locations with light, air, and quietude that allow the women pictured to be independent and fully engaged by their individual intellectual and esthetic interests. The politics of both artists' paintings are grounded in insistent images of female self-definition. The word feminist, sometimes used to describe these paintings, especially Linhares' work, seems superficial. Paintings like these are unique objects, slow, dense and inextricably bound to the history of paintings made by men. Many of Illiatova's works directly reference particular works by painters like Manet and Delacroix. Linhares has spoken of being influenced by Emil Nolde. Both artists are deeply committed to rigorous traditional oil painting practices; both paint very slowly, often reworking paintings for months. In these paintings, women are generalized figures, neither specific individuals, nor symbols of larger meanings. Linhares' and Illiatova's works occupy a unique conceptual position with regard to gender, because the particular activities of the women pictured define them.

The brush is hugely important to both painters. Linhares uses large soft brushes loaded with oily paint to maintain a freshness of color. Illiatova uses flat brushed areas of nuanced value, in relation to the light shining through the windows of her studio, and frequently works from a model, while Linhares makes up all of her paintings from her imagination. In the works of both painters, the spaces between the people are abstract in different ways.

In Linhares' wildly original painting from 2005, *As She Is*, the lush color spectrum, (green-gold, chiffon yellow, coral pink, mint green, lavender shading in to purple), is totally one with her continuously moving brush that smoothly arranges the images, a mountain-like afghan, a pine tree, a sunny moon and female figures floating like naked astronauts. There is also a floating figure in *Source* from 2021, seeming held to one spot in the painting by her long blond hair. The thing that is remarkable about Linhares' recent paintings, is not that the surroundings are more abstract than the figures, but that ostensibly "realistic" figures, often painted a doll-like orangey-pink, are as abstract as the sky. Linhares has often spoken about her work in relation to fairy tales. Fairy tales don't have defined borders between reality and nonreality; in that way, fairy tales seem closer to contemporary lived experience than twentieth century art ideas about the dichotomy between realism and abstraction. Linhares' masterful brushwork keeps her paintings in the ongoing present.

In Illiatova's 2024 painting, *Still, from the Open Window*, a face looks out from the lower right - hand corner of the painting. Although faces gazing out of paintings is a device used throughout the history of European painting, it has a different impact now when everyone is so accustomed to constantly looking down, scrolling on their phones. A face that is looking out of a painting connects with the viewer, but it is also a method of distancing, establishing the painting as an object to be looked at in a particular way. Illiatova's paintings literally cannot be seen quickly. It's a cliché to say that paintings cannot be seen in photographs, but this is especially true of Illiatova's works. Her paintings are emptied of narrative directionality; everyone is busy and nothing is happening. The architecture of the room is articulated with a deliberate geometry of brush marks, very different than Linhares' sweeping strokes. Illiatova's color tends to be close in value, silvery greys with a delicate range of tone, greenish greys, pinkish greys, brownish greys. The spaces within the room are complex, and light is a dominate character. In this

respect, Illiatova's paintings have something in common with Edward Hopper's. Women are in the room, but they also haunt the room. By and large, the women's clothes could be from any time in the last seventy years. In *Still, from the Open Window*, three women are leaning on a table with oddly short legs. One of the women is tall and wears a patterned skirt. To work on the table comfortably, she has to kneel on the floor, (if she stood up, the table would reach to about the middle of her thigh). The woman's kneeling body articulates the height of the table and directs one's gaze to the shadowed space beneath the table which contrasts with the bright, reflecting plane of the top that carries the light from the window into the center of the composition. The slowness of looking at Illiatova's paintings is surprisingly visceral and sensual, especially in 2024, when other sensations fly by so fast.

Judith Linhares' and Vera Illiatova's paintings are mature, confident, complex works, productively informed by art history. There is also a kind of modesty in the size of their paintings. They are two of the best painters working today. Dona Nelson, November 8, 2024