

Elena Sisto: As We Dream at Bookstein Projects

David Ambrose | October 2018

"We live, as we dream-alone."

- Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness



Elena Sisto, *As We Dream*, 2017, Oil on linen, 18 x 24 inches.

The encroaching “darkness” that hangs over Elena Sisto’s somewhat lonely painting show at Bookstein Projects - I counted more insects than people in the ten modest sized paintings- is a long shadow of death cast by a setting sun low on the horizon. It symbolizes the artist, now in her mid-sixties, entering the golden years of her life. However, if one judge’s youth by elasticity, then these smooth, wrinkle-free surfaces seem to imply an artist who is still very active and fit - lighting these canvases is the warm glow of twilight whose redness gives more than a glimmer of hope to the magic hour.

As We Dream is Sisto’s third exhibition with the gallery, but her first in the new uptown space. The theme of travel seems to be very much on the artist’s mind as all of these easel-sized works measure no more than 30 inches on their longest side. Their compactness lends an air of portability to the show. The exhibition unfolds like a well-designed piece of luggage with each of the ten paintings acting as a compartment to collect a series of personal thoughts, dreams or memories.

Sisto’s two prior shows with Bookstein were buttoned down and zipped up with the nuances of clothing. Specifics of style, brand or method of purchase were alluded to in previous titles – *Carhartt* (2013), *Etsy Sweater* (2013-15), *Buffalo Check* (2012). Sisto relished these specifics of fabric and pattern but now her idea of *fold* or *press* now negotiates the crop of the compositions or where the painting surface rests in relation to the viewer. The painted patterns and designs are simplified or codified, as if they were imported from an emoji toolbar rather than from nature. In the current exhibition, only two nondescript tee shirts make a pair of hasty appearances. For all the paintings desired movement, no arms and legs are anywhere to be seen (unless you consider those pesky insects). Only a large, gray left hand cradling a brush in *Yellow Sky* (2018) gives any sense of purpose below the shoulders.

Style is now defined by what lies above those shoulders; growing on top of the artist's head or cradled inside it; not by what is worn below it. Of the ten paintings in the show, seven identify Sisto's persona through the swirl of her long, flowing, silver locks. The hair acts as a shimmering symbol of knowledge and experience while still giving the paintings a whiff of vanity. The cascading curls, manipulated by a fan brush in *Orangefield* (2018) and *Spirited Away* (2018) flow down from her head to her shoulders like a rushing waterfall or a raging river. Below the hair's lacey halo, the faces in Sisto's self-portraits are colored not with her natural flesh tones but with the emotional saturation of deep blue, forest green and fuchsia pink in thinly stacked layers of pigment. They have the feeling of woodblock printing as one sees the strokes of paint but not the weighted character of the bristles.

The studio thoughts and private behavior of Sisto's prior work now become a call to the out of doors, but the "woods" in these landscapes are rendered schematically once again bringing to mind the economical art of the Japanese print. Travel can be implied by title or action as with the twin nocturnes *Mr. Moonlight* (2018) and *Vagabond (For Agnes Varda)*(2018); in the former by a backpack over the artist's shoulder and in the latter by the slice of an empty canvas carried under her arm.

In the landscape *As We Dream* (2017), Sisto takes her place next to us as her white canvas elbows its way out of the frame like a hand delivered invitation to the viewer. The twilight of an orange sherbet sky reflects in a pond lined with a serrated, grassy edge as if cut out with fabric sheers. The painting's spartan composition alludes to Milton Avery (1885-1965), but the smoothness of Sisto's surfaces is more in line with an Avery painting after a trip to Jiffy Lube. The peaceful tranquility is interrupted by the buzz and crawl of insects hinting at the passage of time and our own mortality by acting as vanitas objects.

For all their welcoming warmth, there is a chill of absence about these paintings. It is the result of haste in execution and the loss of the specific points of focus that have made Sisto's work so remarkable and accessible in the past. The richness of those surfaces captured the incidental; as if they were the ruled lines on a door moulding marking off the years of a growing child. Perhaps Sisto realizes that she, like the rest of us, is on the clock. I would encourage her to slow down just a little, bask in the warm, beautiful glow she has generated and take time smell the (emojis) flowers.

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