

Paintings' oddness pushes at viewers while drawing them in

INFANTE-LYONS: Artist creates pleasing tension with contrasts in color, line and subject.

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Anchorage Daily News
Published: February 24th, 2005
Last Modified: February 24th, 2005 at 12:30 AM

The recent work of Linda Infante-Lyons, on display through month's end in the Grant Hall Gallery at Alaska Pacific University, won't present any startling changes to those familiar with her work, but neither will it disappoint them. And for those new to her paintings, there will be agreeable surprises.

Infante-Lyons mines the mythic with her trademark style, skillfully managing the viewer's focus and suggesting mysterious narrative tensions by combining clean-edged and soft images in a dance of improbable landscapes, vegetation and wildlife.

For instance, in "Mating for Life," Infante-Lyons has depicted a pair of rodents that nest within a flowering cactus. The lobes of the cactus's body are rounded, hazily drawn and succulent, no spines visible, and the plant stands before a background of sinuous, marching sand dunes, all curves and soft focus. The blossoms of the cactus stand in contrast, the stamens and petals sharp-edged, the petals contained within a spiky brown husk that, one assumes (if these flowers really existed), would wound the hand that tried to touch them.

One of the rodents, which are the painting's main attraction, is within the body of the cactus, and the other is outside. The one in the nest peeks out of shadows, while the one outside is shown in a curiously flat, naively painted profile. They are soft-focus too, except for the single detail of their eyes, which are baleful, watchful, pitiless and piercing in their sharp rendering.

Infante-Lyons' recourse to contrasting combinations -- of the soft with the sharp, of the curved with the cleanly linear, of primary colors with shades more chromatically subtle -- creates arresting moments of focus in the best of her canvases. The paintings' surfaces are satiny, calling a minimum of attention to brushwork, keeping the viewer's attention firmly focused on line and image.



There is beauty here but nothing cute or prettified about the life the canvases portray. Though it's been said by other reviewers that there is malevolence in the artist's works that stands in contrast to their beauty, I haven't seen it. Instead, it seems to me that there is a defiant and persistent oddity in them, which pushes back at the viewer rather than inviting him in. The paintings seem to assert that, despite one's initial attraction to the landscapes, they do not represent places in which one would feel at home. One is left with the pleasant, floating alienness that sometimes comes to us in travel. We pass through, and are refreshed by, the reminder of what poet Richard Wilbur has called "the buried strangeness which nourishes the known."

This is true even with "Northwestern Fjord" the only work in the show that seems directly to address itself to themes Alaskans would find familiar. In this painting, a salmon resting in a bowl on a covered table occupies the foreground, while the majority of the painting's real estate is taken up by a frame-within-a-frame representation of a window looking out onto a view of mountains dropping off into water. Standard-issue Alaskana, one might be tempted to say, except that the mountain promontory that juts into the ocean seems soft and breastlike, the water is an improbable shade of green and it is filled with icebergs that look like nothing so much as a collection of floating bicuspids. The mackerel sky above this is rumpled like the ocean's surface, which itself is rumpled like the tablecloth. Into this textural conversation, a flowering vine -- whose quatrefoil blossom looks like something out of a medieval illumination -- droops, growing from inside the room.

Similarly, "Alfonsina del Mar" reminds us that even stories we think we know can be retold to us in surprising ways. The painting seems to re-examine Botticelli's "Venus" but suggests that Venus ought to be walking into rather than out of the sea. Infante-Lyons' Venus has her back to us as she moves, already waist-deep, into water whose slight swells are studded with ... coconuts? enormous beans? ... that float, lifting just-opening sprouts and flowers on the water's surface. Is beauty being born, or is it just about to be drowned?

If there is a metaphor that most unites Infante-Lyons' work, it would be that of plants, which, like the vine in "Northern Fjord," assert impossible shapes and aggressive, lugubrious intentions, presenting themselves as challenges, even affronts, to our expectations. Growth duels with corruption in these representations. In "La Pera Infinita," a pear set in solitude on a seemingly infinite plain is approached by two

insects clearly intent on consuming it. The single leaf that clings to the fruit's stem has already been chewed into lace; now it is the turn of the pear itself. The pear is perfect, but it is a perfection rendered poignant by the viewer's understanding that the perfection will last only a moment longer, the narrative of this destruction withheld to provide this tension.

The complex can be rendered simple, and the simple can become infinitely complex. It is a paradox that Infante-Lyons seems to delight in exploring, and this makes even this small showing of her work an exercise in pleasant tensions.

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PASION BOTANICA, new work by Linda Infante-Lyons, will remain on display through Sunday in the Grant Hall Gallery at Alaska Pacific University. Review
Linda Infante-Lyons, Alaska Pacific University