

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## Artweek



### JAMIE VASTA AT PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

Reviewed by DeWitt Cheng

If we accept modernist dicta, art should be pure and abstract, and appeal to the eye. If we adopt postmodernism's analytical mindset, art should appeal to the wary, ingenious mind seeking fortification against the blandishments of an ideologically corrupt reality. For some, the extreme choices of optical hedonism and puritanical skepticism are equally disembodied and incomplete. Bruno Bettelheim, the psychologist who championed the reading of fairy tales by children as preparation for life, said, "We must live by fictions-not just to find meaning in life but to make it bearable." Jamie Vasta, a young painter, wants us to be less decorous and safe; she wants to restore physicality and emotionality to art - to shake us up a bit. Her improbable weapons: glitter, that lowly, kid's craft medium, and, equally unlikely, the fairy tale. These are not Disney cartoons of maidenly virtue, male valor and twittering, chirrupy animals, but something darker, funnier and more subversive: the mordant, R-rated, feminist tales of the English writer Angela Carter, with their echoes of Poe, Baudelaire, the Grimms and Sade. Vasta, who admires Carter's tales, creates visual analogues for them: "In *Mustn't*, the fair maidens of fairy tale, seemingly as delicate and precious as glitter, play out unexpected roles in which they are super-human and predatory...I use the shiny and sinister allure of glitter to entrap you in the story... Color is an intoxicant... To dazzle is to have power." The very title *Mustn't* bespeaks the lure of the forbidden- which will prove, inevitably, overpowering.

Despite the magpie allure of her sparkling surfaces, Vasta's subject matter derives from straight photography or rather from cinema, or a simulation of it, like Cindy Sherman's faux film stills. Vasta photographs three young actors, two women and a man, as they improvise scenes in apparently cold northern woods and thickets, which, rendered in flattish, abstract patterns, seem obstinately indifferent to the dire human dramas played out amid their enveloping tendrils. The actor' implied scenarios tend toward the nightmarish and nefarious, and the viewer, perhaps flashing on scenes from *Blair Witch Project*, *The Village* and *Evil Dead*, struggles to construct a coherent narrative-but in vain. There is no fixed order to the paintings (as far as I know), and what appears to be the sacrifice or execution of the man in *In the Rushes* (with its echoes of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* and Goya's *Ya van desplumados*) is

preceeded and succeeded by images of: the man stalking one of the women through the forest (*Will o' the Wisp*); the binding with red cloth of one of the women by the other (*Stepsisters*); the brandishing of the sacrificial weapon (*The Knife*); the victim's offering of vegetables on a platter (*The Beseecher*); the imminent gutting of a rabbit (*Cottontail*); the brushing of the man's hair as he lies stunned or dead (*Scarcely a Leaf on the Tree*); one of the women striding purposefully amid the trees (*As White As Snow*); and the other woman crawling alongside a stream wearing a lace dress, heavy boots, a bird mask and furry sleeves (*Feral*). This cinematic jump-cutting in time is as unsettling as the seeming impassivity of the women. We are denied even the pleasure or closure of terror and catharsis; trapped inside the film loop, we're forced to replay and relive the incidents. Curiously, the laboriously applied glitter, redolent of movie screen and mosaic, somehow amplifies the effect rather than diminishing it.

What's new about these paintings is their scintillating, hypnotic look, and the subject matter is so old as to be new again. Students of classical mythology (and art history) will recognize her the hideous punishments meted out to unlucky huntsmen who stumbled upon bacchantes or goddesses: Actaeon, for example, glimpsed Diana bathing and was transformed into a stag to be devoured by his own hounds. In *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture*, Bram Dijkstra refers to these dangerous wild women in nineteenth-century art as "poison flowers" and "maenads of decadence." Their return of the temptress/*femme fatale* may, ironically, be away of shaking us from our cozy detached artistic decadence-of restoring Vasta's desiderata of "enchantment, rhapsody, ecstasy, psychosis, and terror." If the price of restoring primal feeling to art is a reversion to and updating of the timeworn pagan legends that most artists abandoned long ago, well, we should remember that recent performance art too flirted with danger and taboo. Are we as rational as we pretend to be? Life, as Cezanne muttered continually, is terrifying; art, through through aesthetic/therapeutic distancing, makes it bearable, mostly.