

PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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Jamie Vasta at Patricia Sweetow

By Melissa E. Feldman



Jamie Vasta *In the Rushes*, 2007, glitter and stain on wood, 60" x 80".

Imagine punked out Pre-Raphaelites up to no good and you have an idea of Jamie Vasta's meticulous paintings in acrylic and glitter on wood (all 2007). Tangled branches of leafless trees marble the backgrounds of scenes dominated by monumental, classically posed sleepwalkers and stalkers, killers and their victims. Kin to Rossetti's and Burne-Jones's elaborately staged allegories of sex and death, with their statuesque brooding maidens, Vasta's ambiguous narratives are melancholy and disturbing despite all the glitter.

In *Scarcely a Leaf Left on a Tree*, a woman kneels beside a handsome blue-eyed corpse, tenderly brushing his hair. Is she his lover, killer or both? Not only is she too old to play the part of the dewy maiden, but her hair—an asymmetrical boy-cut with red streaks—is all wrong for the period indicated by the painting's style. The woman who crawls on all fours across the foreground of *Feral* is shown in profile, her hairy wolf mask and sleeves, diaphanous white dress and heavy biker boots disjunctive enough to form a kind of *corps exquis*.

Like her Victorian forebears, Vasta dresses up her models and photographs them for reference, updating the process by bringing out its collaborative aspect: the on-location interactions of the performers with whom she works take on a life of their own. Indeed, these paintings have the quality of film stills, of iconic moments found and frozen. Working from photographs also enables the artist to faithfully record every detail—the dappled violet sunlight falling through the branches onto a lace dress, pink-tipped fingers grasping a glistening dagger, the intricate underbrush—making the entire surface an embroidery of shining, overlapping patterns. The grain of the wooden supports keeps the decorative rhythm going across occasional gaps.

Vasta's use of glitter evokes child's play, fairies and Disney-associations that prove deliciously at odds with the Blair Witch scenarios. Set amid tall golden reeds from which emanates an otherworldly light, *In the Rushes* shows two women suffocating a man kneeling between them, his hands bound in front, a clear plastic bag over his head. His head is turned, affording a view of his open mouth and anguished expression. White dresses and pigtails make the killers appear girlish before you notice the jeans and the biker boots underneath. It did cross my mind that the figure on the right, with a long knife at the victim's neck, might be cutting the plastic away: freeing him. Similarly, in the painting *Stepsister*, it is hard to tell if the two figures are embracing or wrestling. In manipulating us into being voyeurs, Vasta uses the oldest trick in the book, but it works for her every time.