

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## Dark sparkle: Jamie Vasta's art glitters

By Johnny Ray Huston

Sparkle, San Francisco, sparkle — the Bay Area is a birthplace for visions of glitter. The Cockettes weren't averse to throwing a few antique trunks full of metallic iridescence over their song and dance routines, and the late Jerome Caja mixed glitter with nail polish and liquid eyeliner to create a bad-acid cartoon Maybelline version of Hieronymus Bosch interpreting Dante. Jamie Vasta's use of glitter isn't as campy as the Cockettes' or as lurid as Caja's, but it's on its way to becoming just as distinctive. Vasta doesn't merely sprinkle glitter; with a devotion that's both painterly and sculptural, she allows it to form and dominate her images.

"Mustn't," a show of new glitter- and stain-on-wood works by Vasta at Patricia Sweetow Gallery, proves that while her vision of gender isn't as palsied and perverse as Caja's, it's still subversive. The nine works on display present unified glimpses of a forested world where a man is seduced and either tortured or murdered by a pair of sisters. Vasta has mentioned Angela Carter's fairy-tale revisions when discussing these images, in which femininity is alluring and dominant.

Working from photographs of a trio of professional actors, Vasta creates a claustrophobic, thicketed world where the women's gestures of affection toward each other can also be seen as vicious struggle and where a man might be dead or in thrall to a degree that will soon prove fatal. In terms of technique and approach, wood, not glitter, is Vasta's secret weapon. These works on wood are usually set in a forest, and while Vasta sometimes uses the backdrop in a literal sense to represent branches, she'll just as often rely on stained sections to represent sunny untamed fields. Nature and artifice are at play in works such as Cottontail, in which one of the sisters, skinning a rabbit, wears a skirt printed with proud-looking deer that are almost of a piece with the surrounding landscape.

While Vasta's devotion to glitter is steadfast, "Mustn't" marks a shift in subject matter away from the contemporary landscapes of her past work into a more mythic and at times precious realm, where psychology is more to the fore and references to Judith and Holofernes crop up in an elliptical fashion. As Vasta's wholly individual command of glitter's illusory qualities and depth — as well as its tendency to blur boundaries — has increased, her color schemes have come to flirt more with purples and violets. The thought occurs that she's more comfortable using hues that would set off kitsch alarms if employed by a lesser artist. The one quality that connects the fantasy-based works of "Mustn't" with Vasta's past images of house fires, mysterious blue lights, and tornadoes is a violent air. One gets the feeling that this show is just the beginning of a longer journey through a variety of unsettling zones.

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