

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

77 GEARY STREET MEZZANINE SAN FRANCISCO CA 94108 415.788.5126 F 788.5207

## ARTFORUM

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### San Francisco

#### CRITICS' PICKS

*Jamie Vasta, Nicholas Pye, and Sheila Pye*

SAN FRANCISCO ARTS COMMISSION GALLERY

The San Francisco-based artist **Jamie Vasta** and the Toronto-based husband-and-wife team Nicholas and Sheila Pye each tell stories of mythical female figures whose voices provide agency for death. In the Pyes' video *Loudly, Death Unties*, 2007, a small girl in patent-leather shoes represents a banshee—a spirit from Celtic folklore whose wailing presence heralds imminent death. The child burrows into a woodland cottage, holding a man and woman (played by the artists) captive in a sparsely furnished room. A violin's mournful tune symbolizes the banshee's wail. In one wonderful, uncertain moment, the couple, hearing the music, frantically pry at the door, calling into question whether they are trying to escape or to let the child in. The ambivalence in the gesture links death and release, a relationship echoed in *Sirens #3*, 2009, **Vasta's** large bird's-eye-view painting of a crowd of women cloaked in white surrounding a male figure and pulling him down in what first appears to be a baptism by immersion. The man's ecstatic expression conveys perhaps the final pang of resistance to throwing over sin in favor of new life. Yet on closer examination, his countenance reveals pain; ultimately, desire and death ensnare the sirens' victim in a false promise of regeneration or transformation.

Where the Pyes' tale of the couple's entrapment by the banshee constructs a poignant and complex metaphor for love's futile grasp, **Vasta's** sirens do little more than suggest a profeminist reclamation of the insatiable seductress archetype. Her efforts are diminished by the glitter she exclusively uses in lieu of paint. While the artist intends to draw out the dark undercurrents of desire, the material flattens the images against the surface, literally and figuratively. The shading as a result appears somewhat formulaic, and whatever violence one apprehends in the subject matter is held at bay—whereas the Pyes conjure the belief that they have fully given themselves over to their narratives and entice the viewer into wondering what lies for them beyond.

— Patricia Maloney