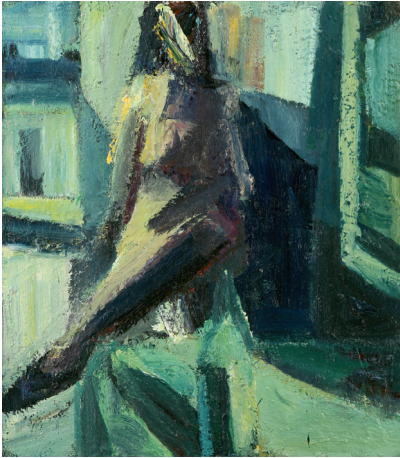


Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

OCTOBER 2011



Terry St. John: Looking Out, 2010, oil on canvas, 48 by 42 inches; at Dolby Chadwick.

SAN FRANCISCO TERRY ST. JOHN DOLBY CHADWICK

Terry St. John's nudes are bodies of substance and weight, the result of his spontaneous response to a live model and his profound understanding of physical structure. St. John studied with James Weeks at the California College of Arts and Crafts in the 1960s, and he carries on the tradition of Bay Area Figuration. Like Diebenkorn before him, he casts the figure as the empathetic protagonist of a relationship of color and space. Prior to 1991, when he began to focus on the figure, St. John painted en plein air with Louis Siegrist, a member of the California Society of Six, who in the 1920s specialized in small landscapes of vibrant Fauve colors. St. John worked as a curator at the Oakland Museum of California for over 20 years (1969-1990); there he organized a definitive showing of The Six as well as a major full-scale exhibition of California Abstract Expressionism. The impact of both movements is registered in his painting.

This recent show included seven

ink drawings of nudes, exuberant black sketches done rapidly with a speedy brush. There were also several small landscape paintings of the Bay Area, in which St. John used gestural strokes to create heavily impastoed surfaces and vivid effects of land and water. The color and heavy mood of these works are reminiscent of Expressionist landscapes by Nolde and Soutine.

Most of the paintings in the exhibition were female nudes arrived at through posing the sitter, observing, painting and overpainting. St. John exposes his model to a direct light that gives each part of the body equal import. Outstanding among these nudes is the 60-by-48-inch *Solveig/Studio* (2011), in which St. John wedged the sitter into the right-hand portion of the painting, anchored by surrounding tables bearing props that help establish a sense of space. From within the encrusted surface, *Solveig* gazes out at and engages the viewer.

Not long ago St. John established a studio in Thailand, where he spends many months each year. The light is different in the paintings he has made there. Instead of distinct contrasts in value, as one sees in the California

pictures, paintings like *Looking Out* (2010) present a mute, diffuse palette, almost like grisaille. They are also more abstract, somewhat Cubist in structure. Deflecting any narrative reading, St. John leaves the faces unidentifiable and mysterious.

—Peter Selz