

Basha Maryanska: A Poetic Solo Show at the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences

Although the term is employed promiscuously in contemporary critical discourse, precious few painters can be accurately called “visual poets.” One was the Chinese-American watercolorist Dong Kingman, who was not only represented in the Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and numerous other prestigious venues that lent official credibility to his reputation as an innovative modernist, but garnered a popular following in the 1950s to rival that of Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth. Another was Loren MacIver, who made her debut in the exhibition “Fourteen Americans” at the Museum of American Art,” which purchased her 1940 oil “Hopscotch,” and went on to paint other glowing urban visions and gain a formidable art world following.

Although Kingman and MacIver also painted occasional landscapes and other nature subjects, they both became known primarily as poets of the city, the former for bustling yet oddly melancholy scenes such as “Mott Street,” 1953; the latter for atmospheric tours de force like “Taxi,” 1952.

Among living artists today, few possess the gift to capture the particular tempo and magic of the city as poetically as Basha Maryanska, in her solo exhibition at the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences.

Maryanska earned her MFA at the Academy of Fine Arts at Gdansk in her native Poland and studied at the Ecole de Louvre in Paris before settling in the U.S. and establishing an international reputation as both an artist and a curator. She embraced New York City as an inspiration for many of her paintings, one of which in the present show, presumably painted after a trip abroad, is titled “Welcome Home.”

It depicts a view of buildings, ranging from the brownstone tenements at the bottom of the composition to the glass and steel towers striving skyward at the top of the picture space. There is no illusion of traditional perspective; all the structures are arranged on the two dimensions of the picture plane in the modernist manner. Yet, despite the semiabstract style of the painting — indeed, even aided by the composition’s strong formal attributes — the magic of a fairy tale realm of spires, steeples, and gables is evoked. It is also enhanced by virtue of the chromatic beauty that the artist creates with a palette

ranging from silvery blues to vibrant orange and yellow hues, which capture the Christmas tree twinkle of the scene’s many lighted windows in buildings both large and small.

Another city scene in the show, “Energy of Times Square,” is a magical view of that much visited thoroughfare that goes far beyond the garish banality to which it is often subjected by artists catering to the tourist trade. With festive colors, fanciful forms,

projects a topsy-turvy metaphysical effect with a mirror-like rectangle at the center of the composition. Within it is a luminous lunar orb, shadowed by bare silhouetted tree limbs, and other trees upside down, as though reflected in the waters of an icy nocturnal lake. In fact, the setting seems to be a place like Central Park after a winter storm, with semi-translucent neo-cubistic snow drifts surrounding a body of blue water



“Adagio”

and the lights of apartment buildings glowing in the middle distance. “Adagio,” as its title suggests, is one of this visual poet’s most moodily compelling pictures, with its atmosphere at once somber and beautiful.

Yet another unabashedly atmospheric, aesthetically appealing, work — itself a courageous thing to attempt, in a century that all too often glorifies ugliness as a necessary component of “serious” artistic expression — is the much larger acrylic on canvas that the artist calls “Connected.” Here the massive rusted gold shore-anchorage that support the cables of a bridge carry the viewer’s gaze across a river to the skyline of a city that appears as if carved in crystal. Its towers and spires rise triumphantly, majestically, against a sky that at first glance appears gray and overcast, yet on closer scrutiny, reveals a panoply of subtle pink tonalities.

and a composition fully as engaging in purely formal terms as a work by Paul Klee, Maryanska paints “The Great White Way,” as it is sometimes known for its glittering array of lights, billboards, and theater facades, predominantly in subtle shades of blue.

The buildings are rendered in a simplified semiabstract manner, as are the towering billboards with ads for “The Lion King,” and other commercial theatrical productions, now replaced by lyrical abstractions in bright shades of pink orange and green, depicting gracefully swirling shapes that call to mind paintings by Picasso or de Kooning. Pedestrians, cars, and taxicabs down below are reduced to lively specks of bright primary hues that, for all their swiftly dashed brevity, evoke the swarming energy of the legendary boulevard that has been alternately dubbed “The Center of the Universe” and “The Devil’s Playground” and been celebrated by writers ranging from Damon Runyon and A.J. Leibling to Jack Kerouac and Samuel R. Delany, among countless others.

In another manner, Maryanska’s “Adagio” is a semiabstract mixed media cityscape that

Maryanska’s skills as a consummate colorist also come across in “Blue New York,” another large acrylic on canvas, depicting the New York skyline on the horizon in the middle distance, with some buildings shrouded in shadow while the taller towers glow with sunlight. Here again, the city takes on the quality of an enchanted realm, suspended between a spacious sky and the waters of the river, both luminously speckled with delicate tones of purple and blue.

Like the aforementioned Dong Kingman and Loren MacIver, Basha Maryanska is a visual poet of the first rank. This exhibition is a must-see for anyone who has all but given up on finding the serenity and spiritual solace of a well-constructed sonnet in the raucous, often violent gladiatorial arena of contemporary painting.

— J. Sanders Eaton

Basha Maryanska, Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences, 208 East 30th St., through February 18, 2014