

# ARTFORUM

## Inka Essenhigh

by Alex Jovanovich



Inka Essenhigh, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2017, Enamel on canvas, 32 x 80 inches, 81.3 x 203.2 cm

When I come across a work of art as weird and seductive and startlingly beautiful as an Inka Essenhigh painting, I haven't the faintest desire to engage in my critical faculties. I just want to be overcome by the supple, erotic strangeness of her surrealist narratives; the chitinous sheen of her works' surfaces; her Prada-meets-*Star Trek* palette; and the gelatinous, ectomorphic figures. You want to dissolve into an Essenhigh painting, in the same way that she dissolves virtually all solidity within her forms and spaces. Every body, every thing looks as though it's made of melted caramel, or flowing silk, or liquid latex suspended midair, or some sinuous, alien protein.

For more than twenty years Essenhigh has been building her peculiar universe, gently pushing into more visceral realms. Earlier works, from about 1999 to 2001, feature fluid yet stringent lines that usher flat planes of rich, enameled color into sensuous, biomorphic shapes. In 2001, the artist started using oil paint. Suddenly her forms and figures popped, contained perspectival depths and roundnesses, cast shadows. The works stopped privileging pure, airless, design. Instead they became more physical, unwieldy, even scary. But not David Cronenberg scary—Essenhigh sublimates the horror: Gloss is gore.

Critics have talked about how her images feel like animation cells, as if they were plucked from some unreleased, golden-age Walt Disney movie—think *Snow White* (1937), *Fantasia* (1940), or *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). But Essenhigh doesn't do the helpless-pretty-princess-waiting-for-her-man thing. Vanilla is not her flavor. Her aesthetic leans toward the crimson sneer and purple eye shadow of the Wicked Queen, the satanic curves of Maleficent's headdress, or the bat-winged hell creature of Modest Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*. Evil is zhoosed-up, glamorous embellishment.

The artist goes well beyond the usual Pop and art-historical references. In her inaugural show at Miles McEnery Gallery, we found hints of John Anster Fitzgerald's nineteenth-century fairy paintings, Andrew Wyeth's bleak nature scenes, Japanese ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Kunisada (as Rob Colvin, who authored an essay for the show's catalogue, helpfully points out), Maxfield Parrish's lurid sunset hues, and even Matthew Barney's libidinal futurism. Essenhigh returned to enamel over the past few years—spectacularly so—as exemplified in the thirteen works in this show. Some of the most striking paintings were of denuded trees, appearing hyperstylized yet oddly natural. *Arbor Ignudi #2* (all works cited, 2017), is all Art Nouveau branches and moments of expiring greens. Several appeared to be in the midst of an eternal winter, rising against banks of milky fog.

Her famous, twisted humanoids made appearances, too. The ladies of *Girls Night Out*, for instance, stand in a dim hallway. They seem to be waiting for a voluminous green ectoplasm to exit the premises. One of the women adjusts her twitching, liquid face in a handheld mirror while a thread of false eyelashes, quivering like the legs of a dying spider, flails on her chest. My favorite was *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a tableau of sprites malingering in verdant hills. A being, dressed in a very *Cremaster-y* jumpsuit, is wrapped in a tarp. A pair of white-calla-lily creatures threateningly stare at a sallow maiden who is half-asleep near a deep-magenta cabbage rose straight out of a Jan van Huysum painting. This regal bit of flora also carries an air of malignancy. It could be poisonous, ready to devour anything it breathes. Let it take me.

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