

ARTFORUM

Pia Fries

CRG Gallery

By David Frankel | April 2007



Erucarum Ortus, 2005, oil and silkscreen on wood, 4 parts, 240 x 170 cm each

Pia Fries's *Loschaug* suite, 2005–2007—eight paintings, on eleven wood panels in all, that together the artist considers a single work—was inspired by the naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, a German/Dutch woman who at the turn of the eighteenth century made a two-year stay in Suriname, then a Dutch colony, today an independent nation on the northern Atlantic coast of South America. Merian went with a plan in mind: to conduct a study of the insects of the region, eventually published in 1705 under the title *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, full of her meticulous engravings of butterflies and moths, beetles and bees, and of the specific plants with which they symbiotically live. A divorced mother in her early fifties, traveling with her teenage daughter, and working on a self-generated project in an entirely male-dominated field, Merian seems a sympathetically modern figure, and indeed she has turned up in recent decades on German currency and postage stamps—and, now, in Fries's paintings.

Fries stages each part of *Loschaug* as a face-off between two very different modes of picture making. The starting point is Merian's painstaking engravings, whose exactness Fries preserves by using a silk-screen process to print them, or images of the jacket of the modern edition of them, directly on the wood panel, or, in one section, by inserting them through elements of collage. Then, often after applying a flat white ground over parts of the field while leaving large bands of the wood bare, Fries extrapolates from Merian's images in her own oils, making thick, creamy, abstract swirls and daubs in strong clean colors. Whether Merian's descriptive drawing and Fries's rougher markings conflict or collaborate is for viewers to say, but I think the mood here is basically appreciative. If, in their size and bright color, Fries's wide lines and sharp ripples usually overpower Merian's more restrained images, they also seem clearly inspired by them: It's not that Fries is using a twenty-first-century painting style to redraw eighteenth-century forms—that correlation is too precise—but that her forms and Merian's harmonize.

The most striking aspect of Fries's work is the thickness of the pigment, which she applies with luxuriance when she chooses while always preserving a basically flat ground against which these more baroque areas stand out in high relief. In *Schwarze Blumen* "*Erucarum Ortus*," 2005, for example, a straight diagonal line of six yellow spots humps up over the surface, each fat and stubby enough to make a platform for a further coloring in of mottled reds. Like Gerhard Richter, whose squeegee effects she sometimes echoes, Fries seems in passages like this to denaturalize painting: Her abstract marks look most like gestural expressionism, but are too deliberately posed, too carefully built up, to act as spontaneous signs of a psychic state. At the same time, if this sense of distance, of contrivance, points to the painting's life as a linguistic construct rather than either a mimetic illusion or a vessel of emotion, the juxtaposition of Fries's images with Merian's throws equal doubt on the linguistic role of modern painting—for Merian's have a clear purpose and function (and are also very pretty), while it is much harder to say just what Fries's language articulates, beyond the pure pleasure of skillfully applied paint. There may be a kind of nostalgia here for the old clarity of representational images—and yet, as soon as that is said, it bounces back: for Fries's plump oils, whose material qualities she so stresses, have an independent richness, while Merian's strengths involve her ability to copy. And so the dialogue between the two women goes rewardingly back and forth.