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Review: A lively dance by Pia Fries

Christopher Grimes Gallery

By Christopher Knight | 10 October 2014



wogen/walten, 2014, Ölfarbe und Siebdruck auf Holz / oil and silkscreen on wood

Five large and five small new paintings on wood panel by Swiss artist Pia Fries are lush in the extreme. The abstractions begin in an unexpected place, with silk-screen fragments that derive from Baroque prints.

But they hardly look old-fashioned. Fries presents the past as prologue.

At Christopher Grimes Gallery she begins with historical etchings by Florentine artist Stefano della Bella (1610-1664), who worked mostly in Paris. Voluptuous high style was his thing – high style plus a kind of mass production new to art.

In a prolific if comparatively brief career, Della Bella produced more than 1,000 different prints, including a famous series on the Dance of Death; they're notable for their sumptuous tonalities and were eagerly collected. (Only one painting by him is known.) Fries transforms his luxurious tonalities into a range of florid marks using brushes, combs, squeegees and straight-from-the-tube paint.

A striated bit of silk-screened sailing ship might form the superstructure for marvelously composed decorative swoops of color, energetic repetitions of pattern and tumultuous mash-ups of organic form. Think of the print as her art's equivalent of a ship's sail rigging – its gaffel, to cite one painting's title. The painted marks, sometimes as thick as cake frosting, go for a wild ride.

Fries' lively dance matches up printing and painting, the multiple and the unique, the copy and the original, the natural and the cultural, the historical and the contemporary. The exploratory energy of the Baroque era, which saw the evils of colonization joined at the hip with the probing spirit of liberating adventure, finds an exquisite new home here.