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Sharon Horvath: Parts of a World

by Ben La Rocco

Sharon Horvath is exhibiting new paintings at Lori Bookstein Gallery. I never imagined what paradise might look like—I never thought of its looking like anything at all—until I looked at these paintings. This sounds like an accolade verging on silliness but it's actually something much simpler. It is not that Horvath has set out to paint paradise—the concept seems ludicrous and would likely appear so to the artist, nor is it that her paintings represent an image or embody a concept of paradise. Rather, by presenting what appear to be very personal (though very allusive) images knit together in a painterly style that is gentle without ever seeming lax, Horvath offers images of our world as I perceive it at those moments when I am most appreciative of being a part of it. Richly optical, full of enticing complexity, intense color, and fascinating characters, Horvath paints the world as it looks to me when I am at my best. These paintings are devoid of cynicism.

Here's one description of such a world, drawn from a painting entitled "Afterlife." Bathed in a hazy atmosphere, an impenetrably umber -colored pond hovers on the horizon, stretching out toward the borders of our perception. The pond is circumscribed by a railing glowing in warm hues, which is in turn enclosed by a lush green wash of foliage of every imaginable variety stretching outward to the sky above. Instead of clouds, there is sea life, silhouetted like Matisse's late cut-outs and tapestries. Interspersed throughout the interstices of this densely crowded world are tiny images: baseball diamonds, boats, and people barely visible in the mist. At the precise center of all this is the dark green shade of a tiny horse and rider visible through a gap in the railing, just above the pond. Despite its outlandishness, the setting seems familiar, quotidian, like a park passed regularly on the way to work, its mood changing with the seasons and the day's light. There is an uncanny sense of observed reality about Horvath's otherworldly afterlife.

In the paradise of Greek mythology, the souls of the heroic and the just dwell in the Elysian Fields of the underworld. Greek mythology draws only a vague distinction between life on Earth where gods and humans jostle each other for position, and the afterlife. So close are the two realms, that the gods bear children with mortals, creating real trouble when these Promethean offspring get restless and attempt to bring to their earthly parents knowledge reserved for the gods alone. Thus the ancient Greeks could see fit to put paradise in hell and hell, in turn, within walking distance of Earth. From a Catholic perspective, let alone a Protestant, this is really mixing things up. But perhaps

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we'd have a better grasp of paradise—what it actually might be, beyond a concept—if we had an example to go by, a view of existence in which the distinctions between different states of being are not so sharply defined; in which pragmatism or utilitarianism would have little traffic; in which our instincts, our deeper feelings, and our subconscious might find more room to breathe and inform our activity in this world.

"Night Bed" (a title I almost regret: it confirmed an intuition as to the painting's specificity, but it also suggests a thematic resolution, a closure which all Horvath's paintings avoid) strikes me as an answer to Musa Meyer's book *Night Studio*, her revealing and unsettling biography of her father Phillip Guston. *Night Studio* describes Guston as a man whose family often seemed to be in the way of his art. Think of Guston's chilling pictures of himself and his wife, Musa, in a bed in which sleeping seems like drowning. Horvath's "Night Bed," on the other hand, is electric. Above manganese sheets and rose pillows winds the Prussian blue headboard. It is flanked on one side by a vertical swath—this is a six-foot painting—of a barely defined city at night and on the other by a lunar landscape. Composed of the same shimmering grid that defines the city, this bed is a destination and a universe unto itself. It is a beloved object. It designates the home as a source of inspiration for the artist. Beginning in 2002, both this painting and "Afterlife" took seven years to make.

The exhibition's title, *Parts of a World*, comes from a Wallace Stevens poem. Poetry has an aleatory, synthesizing function: it is no accident that the first great Western poet was Greek. Horvath's paintings are poetic and soothing—pleasurable in the most challenging sense. She leads us carefully up over the top of the precipitous incline to which we cling in disbelief and invites us to contemplate the rolling vastness and safety of an Elysian field.