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Resika: A Decade of Painting 1993-2003 at Vered Gallery
By David Cohen

Every picture by Paul Resika is a manifesto for pleasure. Color, gesture, impasto, motif: All betray the hand of a voluptuary. The Baudelaire-inspired title of Matisse's great masterpiece, "Luxe, Calme et Volupté," could be appropriated by Mr. Resika for almost any of his own bucolic, lyrical, sensual canvases.

Vered Gallery in East Hampton offers a rich selection of Mr. Resika's work from the last decade. There is almost a symbolic resonance in seeing Resikas displayed on the ritzy Long Island Riviera: Recreation and indulgence are their thinly disguised subplot. But pleasure is no synonym for lightness or inconsequentialness. Gauguin did aesthetics a disservice when he pronounced that nothing pretty can be beautiful. An underlying suspicion of pleasure, a sense that art needs to be difficult, dangerous, or disconcerting to warrant any kind of serious attention, has become a tiresome orthodoxy in contemporary thinking.

Of course, art does need at some level to engender complexity, ambiguity, a hint of its own opposite, to be satisfying and intriguing. Matisse's work always frustrates a full capitulation to the kind of sensual delight he claimed for his art. Likewise, there is usually just sufficient awkwardness in Mr. Resika's works, a toughness of form, to prevent his smooth, generous compositions from slipping too serenely through the retina.

Mr. Resika belongs to a strand of American painting—Milton Avery is a significant forebear—characterized by warmth, delicacy, and sweetness. He, perhaps not coincidentally, shares a place in this tradition with other sometime pupils of the Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann—among them Wolf Kahn and Robert De Niro, Sr.

Usually, an exhibition of Mr. Resika's works offers variations on a single motif. The broad cross-section of subjects on display in East Hampton, with canvases sometimes hanging cheek by jowl, avoids the problem of formula that can beset a mono diet of his motifs. It thus proves a less precious way to get introduced to Mr. Resika's oeuvre.

His recent show at Salander-O'Reilly, for instance, focused on the solitary nude seated or reclining in a hybrid landscape-interior space. "Dark Lady" (200l-02) is arguably as fine an example of this subject as any of the canvases in that show, and is shown at Vered for the first time.

There is a hard-won density to both tone and texture here that sets this canvas apart from the more hard-edged color and clarity of line typical of Mr. Resika's paintings. The background is animated by a fleshy, writhing calligraphy that brings to mind De Kooning. The figure, seen from the back, is a vague mass of earthy terra cotta, given precise definition by an overlaid linear arabesque of Matissean-Oriental economy.

The earliest work in the show, "Blue Mountain, Provence" (1987-92) is the most closely related to Hofmann, although it is also among the more naturalistic works on offer. The bold, simple subjects—houses, a tree, a blaze of blue sky—become veils of color, pushing and pulling the eye back and forth.

The most abstract work in the show, "Blue Creation" (2001), floats a three-sided geometric form and two overlap-ping orbs (one of them, a yellow disk wobbling off-center on a large white one, inevitably recalls a fried egg) with three fish swimming around. Even .when approaching Miró or Kandinsky In terms of disengaged symbolism, the epicurean Mr. Resika takes the viewer to the dinner table.

"Divine Geometry" (2002) has a nude contemplating a triangle in the sky. The work, whose title could refer, equally to the contemplator or the contemplated form, recalls Dürer's famous print, "Melancholia," but Mr. Resika is an artist temperamentally incapable of 1re blues. A night scene of two boats under the moon has an audacious black sky that constitutes fully two-thirds of the picture surface. Black has rarely looked brighter or fresher than it does in this painting.