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HYPERALLERGIC

Tripping Out: The Upended Landscapes of Shara Hughes

by Jason Stopa on March 5, 2016



Shara Hughes, "Eye of the Swell" (2016), oil, acrylic, flashe, and spray paint on primed and raw canvas, 68 x 60 inches (all images courtesy Marlborough Chelsea)

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For her solo debut at Marlborough Chelsea, Shara Hughes presents eight near-dizzying kaleidoscopic paintings of landscapes and oceans. Titled *Trips I've Never Been On*, the exhibition reveals the artist's sensitivity to her mediums, which include oil, acrylic, Flashe, and spray paint, often on raw canvas. There is no shortage of influence from Early Modernism in these works, as evidenced by vivid color contrasts reminiscent of Matisse's Fauvist landscapes and decorative patterning comparable to Gustav Klimt's *plein air* paintings. A contemporary antecedent might include Gregory Amenoff, whose seminal works of the 1980s revisited a Romantic belief in the restorative power of nature. Hughes distinguishes herself with uncanny, fragmented views that eschew the easy reception that otherwise might have been enjoyed by such dreamy visions.

As an example of such distancing is "Eye of the Swell" (2016), which takes elements of the landscape and uses them as a doubled framing device. A border is created through thin, horizontal strokes of cool grey, which encloses an inner border made from waves painted in turquoise and ultramarine blue, which in turn houses the active space of the painting. Here, Hughes paints simplified waves, rocks, a distant mesa resembling Wyoming's Devil's Tower, and a bluish-white sky. All of this structural work is at the service of the central form, where three vertically-stacked hollow circles, outlined in impastoed crimson-blacks, offer abstract variants of the painting's color, surface texture and iconography. This central form radically skews an otherwise traditional landscape, bending our orientation toward other horizons. Peering into the circles, we are soon snapped back toward the entirety of the painting. This work, along with others in the exhibit, reveal the mystifying breach between our own subjective perceptions, our memories of a lived event and reality. When Klimt went on his *plein air* painting expeditions, he would often use a telescope or "viewing frame," both tools with the capacity of presenting a detail as a totality. Similarly, this central form acts as pair of binoculars, ones that peer beyond the world of given appearances.



Shara Hughes, Installation Shot of "Trips I've Been On" (2016) (click to enlarge)

In contrast, "I Spy" (2016) veers toward the otherworldly. Here, a curved, thinly painted, warm yellow form that follows the perimeter of the canvas along three of its four sides, reading as low hanging leaves at the top and a hillock at the bottom. Thickly impastoed, dirt-brown swatches of paint dart across the yellow lead the eye to the central clearing — a glade where a sagging turquoise-blue tree stands, its leaves drifting upward like a mushroom cloud against a blue-black sea and a large, baby blue crescent moon. This almost child-like, primordial view of nature lies somewhere personal memory and an imagined Paradise.

Shara Hughes, "I Spy" (2016), oil, acrylic, flashe, and spray paint on primed and raw canvas, 68 x 60 inches (click to enlarge)



Trips I've Never Been On upends expectations of the natural world, rendering its familiarity into something mysteriously foreign. In her book, *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place* (Lexington Books, 2014), Janet Donohue writes, "The artwork does not merely represent something or someplace, it opens up a place that is incalculable, unmanipulable. It is a place of dwelling." The virtual world contains a mapped photo archive of nearly every intersection, forest, and body of water; the implications of such a world where all places are always already "known," are decidedly prescriptive. It suggests that lived encounters in the natural world need no further exploration, that tangible experience is generally rote and unrevealing. Shara Hughes' recent body of work affirm that nothing could be further from the truth.

Shara Hughes: Trips I've Never Been On continues at Marlborough Chelsea (545 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 12.