

GLORIA STERN
The Viewer

A certain choreography happens in the museum or art gallery. Once inside, we move about the rooms in trance-like states as if released from the pressing rhythms of the world. Standing motionless in front of a painting, we lean in close, trying to see it for what it is. A quick look at the wall label, the way the person in front did, and we step back for an expanded view. This inward process of viewing is not a detached contemplation. It is a dance of sorts in which the viewer stands at a threshold. One's being catches views of itself.

Gloria Stern's paintings bring an awareness that here, in the liminal space of art, we cross a line of separation to experience the work and perhaps even expand to include it. Taking us out of ourselves, inviting us to lean in further, the work is the actual threshold that makes this all happen.. Observation is deep on both sides.

It is true that in the museum, art works occupy a different kind of space from the space of other objects in the world. An essential paradigm for cultural encounter, the conventions by which we understand otherness and objects are produced in part by the museum. Stern explores this space and carries it colliding into different times and places to challenge the nature of the frame itself and reflect upon the value of an open art experience in cultivating thinking dispositions. How are we to move beyond the second-hand world of readymade interpretations and assumptions and find the necessary empathy?

In these pictures of pictures and pictures of people looking at people looking, we viewers, like the artist herself, are very present. Sharing the space with the work to participate in the storytelling and cultural shift, we stand apart as our own view. Stern's relay of observing observers, invites us to take a long look. Letting the other in, takes time and attention.

Referencing characters and pictorial conventions from the Ukiyo-e genre of printmaking and painting that developed in metropolitan Tokyo (Edo) in the late seventeenth century, Stern adopts a kind of Japonisme to depict a theatre of her contemporary life. Borrowed motifs from the 'floating world', such as Kabuki actors, courtesans, geishas, warriors and emperors live together with present-day occidental and oriental tourists. An Alice-in-Wonderland girl-child, Barack Obama poster, paintings from the artist's own archive and the parents of a Jewish giant once photographed by Diane Arbus, further press the play of influence between the traditional and contemporary, East and West, male and female. Shaped by language and circulation, social, economic and representational regimes, Stern exposes the contingencies that escape our habits of seeing.

There is no identity without difference; at the same time someone is being made exotic, they are being made the same. A kind of performative allegory on the relationship of viewer and viewed and their violation of borders, it seems perplexingly in Stern's work that the view itself is viewing us.

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