

Power and Transcendence in the Tondos of Mary Frances Judge

One of the more unusual pleasures of this city is finding excellent exhibition spaces tucked away in unexpected places. One of the more interesting of such venues is the Digital Sandbox Gallery, at 55 Broad Street, 4th floor. This is a handsome alternative venue in a large office building right across the street from The New York Stock Exchange, which places it in a location where finance and art can be said to intersect, since it's close to both Wall Street and within walking distance of Tribeca, where many artists live and have their studios.

Generously donated by the Rudin Corporation for art exhibitions under the direction of Jane St. Lifer, an independent curator and appraiser, the gallery is open to the public free of charge Monday through Friday from 9 to 5 PM. (ID is required to enter the building.)

Featured through the month of April is a solo exhibition of paintings by Tribeca artist Mary Frances Judge, who has exhibited widely throughout the United States, as well as in Italy and Brazil, and whose work is in numerous prestigious public and private collections here and abroad.

"A recycler of human material and energies, I collect the cast-off personal effects of people living and dead," Judge has stated of her work. "A commitment to some type of psychic and spiritual human ecology moves me to rescue these materials representative of human life so that they not be disrespectfully abandoned or discarded...The psychic energies invested in these abandoned materials by their former owners seek release as I grapple with them, playing with them and allowing them to speak to me as they dictate to me their desired new state. As I embed them in the paint, the original features of these materials are more or less lost in the process of transfiguration."

Although Mary Frances Judge has worked with the figure in past exhibitions, such as her major solo show at Monogramma Arte Contemporanea, where paintings such as "Degli Dei al Tevere" centered on mythological faces, the overall thrust of her paintings in the present show at Digital Sandbox gallery is abstract. Even when figurative elements can be discerned, as seen in her large mixed media painting "Europa," where the suggestion of a simplified profile appears in the left hand corner of the circular canvas, the composition compels our attention by the sheer force of form and color. Here, boldly brushed areas of luminous orange and green hues are juxtaposed with gestural strokes of red violet to create a chromatic dynamism suggesting that the painter has dipped her brush in liquid light. Further enlivened by splashes and spatters of darker hues, "Europa" combines the lyrical sweep of abstract expressionism with a more post-modern sense of submerged content and symbolic allusiveness.

Described by the artist herself as "a mythological expression of Global Outreach in the united forms of feminine and masculine archetypes," this canvas, like all of those in the present exhibition is a tondo, a circular format that became fashionable in the mid 15th century Italian Renaissance, which she has revived more consistently than any other contemporary artist that one can name. The tondo is an auspicious format for Judge's paintings, since a circle is infinite in

viewer with its chromatic subtlety, created with close-valued variations of yellow and orange hues that evoke a sense of the rarefied light of the early morning hours, in the latter canvas Judge sets a monolithic red central shape, limned in a flat "hard edge" manner, against a lighter blue in a composition notable for its emblematic boldness.

Then there is "Al Lago," another dynamic tondo in which a sumptuous expanse of



"Europa" 72" Mixed Media

its dimensions and complements the natural expansiveness of her forms, lending even her smaller compositions a sense of scale much larger than their actual size. This seems particularly true of her painting "911," in the present show. As befits an abstract interpretation of a dark day in our nation's history, the colors in this canvas are more somber than those that Judge employs habitually, while its especially rough textures, created with collage elements submerged below the thickly pigmented surface, suggest the density of the debris in the gaping cavity at Ground Zero.

Larger tondos such as "Dawn" and "Gemini" demonstrate the impressive range of compositional and coloristic diversity that Judge achieves within the format. While the former painting is amorphous in the manner of color field painting and enraptures the

blue is set against rhythmic yellow textured forms in the lower portion of the composition, suggesting a horizon of waves flowing against a nocturnal sky.

Mary Frances Judge is an artist with the ability to convey a host of meanings, both material and spiritual, through her powerful yet subtle manipulation of abstract form and vibrant color. The innate tactility of her relief-like painted surfaces imbues her tondos with a physically imposing presence, bespeaking a sensuous worldliness, while her lush and lyrical use of color conveys something more ethereal, akin to spiritual auras. Her work is filled with quiet conviction and conveys a contagious sense of joy and fulfillment to the perceptive viewer. Such transcendence is a rare quality in contemporary painting and deserves to be savored.

—Maureen Flynn