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“Review: Judith Linhares paints the joys of life, on her own terms”

by Sharon Mizota

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If joy can be expressed in painting, then Judith Linhares has captured it in a small bottle of Joy dishwashing liquid.

The bright yellow bottle is sunny and happy and solid, flanked by equally plump and self-satisfied fruit. The only potential cloud is a small gray drawing of a skeleton, pinned on the cheery, green-and-blue gridded wallpaper nearby. But even that can't spoil the vibe. The painting fairly shines with the confidence of a woman who has been painting for five decades. The shadow of death be damned.

Linhares created “Joy” in 2017, but her exhibition at Various Small Fires largely spans the last decade, in one case reaching as far back as 1990. The show is dominated by fantastical tableaux of nude women, picnicking or communing with wild cats. They express a similar joy, a languid ease



Judith Linhares, *Lunch*, 2012 (Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles)

with the female body in a landscape without men. The most resonant reference is Edouard Manet's 1862 painting, “Luncheon on the Grass.” It's famous for its purposeful awkwardness, juxtaposing a naked woman, gazing frankly out at the viewer, with two fully clothed 19th century men. At the time, the painting poked fun at popular mythological and historical paintings in which nude women frolicked unselfconsciously in the woods.

Linhares' picnics imagine what happens when the men are removed from the picture. The nude is joined by friends who are also awkward, posing upside down with their legs against a tree, bent in half on a picnic blanket, or sitting with their legs splayed. Rendered in great, confident slashes of paint, these poses suggest sexual availability but aren't really sexy. Like Manet's painting, they invoke a tradition only to shut it down.

Yet Linhares also has her own fantasies. These long-limbed, pale-skinned women are surrounded



Judith Linhares, *Joy*, 2017 (Image courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles)

by food and drink and live in landscapes that pulse with color or are perhaps even extraterrestrial. In “Cove,” from 2010, there might be two or three suns above the rocky outcropping on which the figures recline. This world might be a matriarchal society, or an alternative myth from a time before (or after) men.

In recent paintings, the women are more active. The aforementioned images of women interacting with wild cats are from 2016. In “Dig,” from last year, a woman stands astride a shallow pit, holding a shovel. Her head, positioned at an awkward, backward-leaning angle, is looking down. It is perhaps another meditation on mortality, although an empowered, self-directed one: a powerful woman, digging in on her own terms.

*Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave., L.A.
Through Feb. 24; closed Sundays and Mondays.
(310) 426-8040, www.vsf.la*