

ARTINFO

Weekend Picks

Bettina Sellmann in New York

By Kris Wilton

Published: December 18, 2008

NEW YORK— **Bettina Sellmann**, who was born in Munich and lives and works in Brooklyn, is known for creating what she calls “see-through versions” of Old Master paintings. In early works this might mean a classically staged portrait gone translucent and ethereal, the sitter’s edges lost in a waft of soft color, the subject looking ghostly, lost in space, there and not there.



But in her latest show of watercolors — her fourth at Derek Eller Gallery in Chelsea, through January 10 — Sellman presents work that is at once bolder, more lyrical, and more abstract. In these intense, richly colored paintings there’s a sense that two opposing forces are at work: one concerned with beauty and lyricism, and one seething with violence.

While the airy *Your Skin* gently conjures two nuzzling lovers from what appears to be a swirl of plum-gray smoke, *Dogdreams* features a prone figure caught in an explosion of red. *The Sexual Phantasies of Women* shows a dark, faceless character bent over a topless female figure, her arms held tight behind her and her skirt trailing off in a wash of blood red. And *My Killer and Me*, a spare composition in browns and black, shows a hated figure kneeling over someone awkwardly sprawled on the ground, the lines devolving into scrawls, the paint left to drip, and the word “love” inscribed in the middle of it all.

Sellmann begins each work with a theme, and key to this exhibition, titled “Taina . cosmogeny . make your own paper dragon,” she says, is exploring individuals’ place in the world and human motivations — whether internal forces like sex drive and the Freudian death wish, or external ones like religion and war. But when it comes to the painting process itself, she aims to remove all intellectualizing and work from a deeper, more psychic space, she says, and is often shocked by the product.

Some of the results appear “really strange” to her at first, and it’s true that the imagery — like its source material — can be dark. In *At Church*, for example, which interprets a scene from Faust in which the ingénue, Gretchen, seeks refuge from an evil spirit, we see a watery blue figure, nearly obliterated by an inky cloud, moving toward a distant, solid structure. It’s an apt metaphor for Sellmann’s practice.