

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Paloma Varga Weisz

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The voice of officialdom at Gladstone Gallery tells us that, for her latest show, Paloma Varga Weisz is returning to a milieu that she first explored at the Kunsthalle Wien last year: the American Gilded Age. That would likely explain the head of a period *Con Man* (all but one picture is from 2008) emerging out of the shadows of a blue-grey watercolour; also *Grumbler*, a fashionable deb with complicated hair and rouged cheeks; and *The Governess*, a dame with a pinched nose. For sure, all might have been drawn from the brass-tacks fiction of Theodore Dreiser, yet there's a lot more in this show which seems to derive from myth – and myth of a curiously globalised variety.

It is as if the German-born artist had taken her country's Romantic idea of the *volksgeist*, the national folk spirit, and imagined what it might look like if all the world's cultures were contributing to the same pot. Hence we encounter Eastern flavour in two conical, figurative sculptures woven from wicker like pristine wastepaper baskets and crowned with limewood heads that bear Asian features. They stand facing each other like communicating spirits. Elsewhere there are a series of wall-mounted busts made of carved limewood plated in copper: among them is *Hatman*, who resembles a sad leprechaun; *Wigman*, whose headpiece is lined with bulbous protrusions; and *Hoodman*, whose Asian-looking limewood head peeks from his copper hood like a religious acolyte wearing robes for a flaming initiation.

Far from confining herself to a theme and a period, Varga Weisz is letting herself roam where her spirit takes her. Why be constricted when wandering yields results of such uncalculated ease? Indeed, there's so much ease in her work that it seems otiose to make

hard critical judgements on her. That might explain why surprisingly little has been written about her since she began to exhibit with regularity a decade ago. But then she's also troublesome. Her characterful watercolours may at times be reminiscent of Egon Schiele and Marlene Dumas, but they lack the same charge. Her work only gets really interesting when it expands in scale. Hence *The Cabinet* is the finest work in the show: a large oval wood barrel lying lengthways, it confronts us with a base that bears a pale stain, as if something has passed through it; walk around to the other side and we find the barrel is empty and a black dress is suspended from a coat hanger inside, with limewood arms and legs dangling, as if the headless woman had hung herself. There's high sculptural ambition in this, as well as shades psychoanalysis and gender politics; serious red meat that doesn't display itself so often in the artist's watercolours. The woven basket figures are also brilliant inventions – sculptural one-offs and evocative images. Officialdom can say what it wants, but Varga Weisz is yet to tame her considerable talent and make it do just one thing. *Morgan Falconer*

Basket Man, 2008, lime wood, varnish, wicker, 220 x 110 x 110 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York