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EAST CITY INTERVIEWS: EMMA STEINKRAUS

By Eric Hope on March 26, 2013



"Colorado" (detail). Photo courtesy of Emma Steinkraus.

Whether for a moment or a lifetime, relationships are tricky beasts. The single among us often pine for one, the jilted disavow them and long-term mates struggle to keep them. Despite the blather on daytime talk shows, there is no instruction book; supposed guideposts are more like mirages on the road of life. So how does one make sense of it all? Well if you're Emma Steinkraus you paint. You

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sees these figures as anonymous actors staged in a play. Emotions evinced by these “actors” run the gamut from sticky sweet to palpably tense, yet even in tense moments the actors connect physically, as if seeking a resolution to their struggle.



“Monogohela”. Photo courtesy of Emma Steinkraus.

The concept of a stage is apt, because although the background varies, the characters seem to remain remarkably front and center. At first this seems counter-intuitive, given that Steinkraus tells me about her fascination with 15th century Netherlandic paintings, or paintings of “little figures moving in detailed spaces” as she describes them. A century later, these Northern European painters would turn more towards documenting the profane world around them, but in the 15th century the painterly eye was still sacredly raised to the heavens. Steinkraus’ works don’t feel overtly religious to my eye, so I ask her explain how this genre works its way into her modern-day narratives. Steinkraus tells me that, “unlike some contemporary artists, I don’t see my obsessions [as] only possible today,” meaning the quest for

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urbanity act as stage sets that separate us from nature writ large. Behind the staged actors lies a veritable Eden, though not exactly the Eden portrayed in those centuries-old religious paintings. Steinkraus likens them to “fabricated landscapes” pieced together from photographs and her imagination to envision the natural world we wish we could inhabit. In each work multiple relationships come slowly into view as Steinkraus ponders not just our interpersonal relationships, but our ecological relationships as well.



“Sundown, Arkansas”. Photo Courtesy of Emma Steinkraus.

Take for instance *Sundown, Arkansas* the largest work in the exhibition clocking in at almost eight feet wide. There is a strong narrative thread through the work, as we watch young lovers walking across the parking lot of a convenience store. Hands are held firmly, yet they look away from one another and there is tension in the young man’s body language. They’re physically linked but perhaps mentally estranged, and their personal interaction mirrors their association with the greater environment around them. Across the sky a beautiful sunset peeks out over a mountain range, the colors a homage to the seminal California artist Ed Ruscha (another lover of fabricated landscapes), yet the couple is cut off from the serenity of the scene by the harsh light of a gas station canopy. Here in the majesty of

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"Driving at Dusk". Photo courtesy of Emma Steinkraus.

If Steinkraus views one type of relationship (to each other or to nature) as more valuable she is mum on the answer. What she does seem to espouse is the notion that a full emotional life requires both and it's a hard struggle to strike that balance. I wonder aloud if all this searching has led to any answers – has she found the keys to success in relationships? She scoffs at the notion that there is a definitive path or lone set of answers. What she has learned, she tells me, is that relationships are constantly surprising. They take on a life of their own. Their constantly changing boundaries require work to maintain. Most of all, relationships bring value to our lives in direct proportion to the effort we put in to them.

Emma Steinkraus runs March 28th through May 23rd, 2013 at the Evolve Urban Arts Project with an opening reception March 28 from 5:30-8:30pm. For more information, visit their website [here](#).