

JANE HAMMOND

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LELONG *by nancy princenthal*



NEW YORK Jane Hammond's "Dazzle Paintings" (all 2011) have gleaming, jumpy highlights that seem digitally programmed to respond to a viewer's movement, though they don't require so much as a plug. Spectacular in a decidedly old-fashioned way, they mix melancholic nostalgia and canny effervescence with a practiced magician's dexterity.

Hammond's ingenious technique involves very thin sheets of Plexi-mounted, tawny-colored mica, on which she applies pale, fragmentary diagrams using silver, gold, copper and palladium leaf. These delicate surfaces become the backgrounds for images painted in black acrylic and derived from altered composites of old photographs. Behind the translucent mica sheets, each in a boxy frame, is a layer of crumpled foil that fractures and amplifies the penetrating light. Thus the twinkling highlights, on which Hammond deftly capitalizes to illuminate a forehead, a knee, pointed toes.

Subjects include a girl in a dress on a jungle gym and a boy with a box of Ritz crackers in his lap. Their expressions, respectively, are vaguely anxious and strenuously smug. Sprung from a trampoline, a man soars high above an adoring crowd, whose eager, upturned faces make his downwardly extended arms seem a gesture of blessing. Ascension recurs in the image of a happy child tossed into the air by what must be her proud father. Another painting shows one grown woman holding another, *pietà*-style; both wear swimsuits of the 1940s and are smiling broadly.

In the most commercial-looking image (it could be a 1950s-ish prostitute's fancy business card), a half-naked woman regards the camera from hooded eyes as light catches her breasts and pouting lips. The most conceptually ambitious painting (and, at 39½ by 52 inches, one of the largest) shows a mysterious group: two seated men in turbans, three G.I.s snapping photographs and a Western woman with a snake draped around her neck, all gathered around another snake curled (conjured?) at the bottom of the composition. Turbaned children in the background, standing at stiff attention, are hard to distinguish from carved elements of partly ruined architecture. The Americans alone are grinning. It is hard not to read their cameras as guns.

The prevailing tone is of stagy happiness, seen through a darkly glittering lens. The format evokes handmade Victorian entertainments and recalls the sources that Hammond, an inveterate collector of ephemera, turned to for earlier work. Here, she directs her materials toward the reconstruction of found memories. As we watch, they separate into gossamer layers, each unreliable on its own but together deeply compelling—not least because they're ungraspable.

Also on view was a selection of small selenium-toned silver gelatin prints (2009-11), from a series begun in 2005. Exquisitely detailed, haunting and funny, these surreal, digitally assembled composites derive from the same collection of vintage photographs Hammond employs for the "Dazzle Paintings." In comparison, the photographs seem like private, keepsake versions of the larger works, which, as with performances, demand a public and celebrate the fugitive.

Photo: Jane Hammond: Snake Charmers, 2011, acrylic paint on mica over Plexiglas with metallic leaf, 39 1/2 by 52 inches; at Lelong