

# Inka Essenhigh

By *Stephen Maine*  April 26, 2010 2:35pm



Like a great ship gradually reaching her port of call, **Inka Essenhigh** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/inka-essenhigh/>) has emerged from the open ocean of

figurative abstraction and slowly, inexorably drawn up to the welcoming pier of illustration. This gifted, always-interesting painter is on record as wanting her work to be “accessible,” but half of the 10 paintings in “The Old New Age,” her latest solo exhibition, border on kitsch.

Each is dated 2009 and is roughly 5 by 6 feet or the reverse. The nadir is *Molly Waiting in Field*, in which a sturdy mare the color of midnight, alone in a golden pasture, gazes toward a distant wood. Ironic or not, this is slick, sentimental garbage. *Summer Solstice* depicts a fallen birch tree rotting among green-gray weeds above a moon-shadowed, deep blue vale. From the crevices in the peeling bark, a face smiles beatifically at swarming fireflies. Ouch.

On the other hand, *Fog, Moss, Lichen* (2008) is enchanting, otherworldly. A spongy tract of variegated greenery floats among encroaching waves of silver mist. A faint trail winds through a spiky copse of leafless trees reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich, but

these trees have preternaturally abundant orifices—an alternative “romantic” tradition?

Thomas Kinkadee meets Middle Earth in *Lower East Side*, a kind of urban nocturne that makes you remember that you might have once been taken in by this magic-realist stuff. (You were younger then, and evenings were electric.) From a golden brown redoubt casting hot-pink light onto a narrow trash-strewn street devoid of cars, a cluster of revelers spills out, blowing smoke and laughter. A totally jazzed guy with a guitar pops up through a cellar door. A muscular cutie strides home while another character looks on from a fire escape. A bag lady trundles along. The glittering towers of Midtown, seen through a chink in the painting’s upper east side, seem to be a world away.

Keyed to muddy red and briny gray-green, *Minor Sea Gods of Maine* is more like Essenhigh’s work of a few years ago. A very ripped, torso-like water funnel poses offshore, catching the attention of a nubile, crashing wave. As ever, Essenhigh’s bravura paint handling is

grounded in rock-solid chromatic counterpoint. The painting signals “trust me, I know what I’m doing.” With some reluctance (and watchful for unicorns, rainbows and trolls snoozing beneath mushrooms) you give this thoughtful, soulful artist the benefit of the doubt.

*Photo: Inka Essenhigh: Lower East Side, 2009, oil on canvas, 74 by 70 inches; at [303](https://www.artnews.com/t/303/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/303/>).*

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