



Inka Essenhigh
Lower East Side
2009
303 Gallery

MASTERPIECE MAGIC

by Charlie Finch

Inka Essenhigh's strong new show at 303 is full of her bubbling sinkholes, time trippy wormholes, a water spout that resembles a squid and a black stallion in verdant yellow field. Yet one painting, completely different from the rest, stuck in my vision for days. It is called *Lower East Side* and it is the most complex and spiritually charged piece Inka (or very few others) has ever painted.

In subject and style, *Lower East Side* is a fusion of **Paul Cadmus** and **Balthus**. It is as if one of Balthus' young femme models had strangled the old hornymeister and painted her own self-portrait, from the rear, dashing down the alley in tomboy clothes and sneakers, while a chorus of pink male drunks serenades her from a circular pub nearby.

Lower East Side has the rhythm of Cadmus, the undulating emancipation of human life on the New York grid, but, by miraculously thrusting an alley into the distance of the right hand corner of her masterpiece, Essenhigh adds visual element right out of **Thomas Hart Benton** to Paul's joyously sinful street.

The eye wanders all over this canvas looking for new surprises and up pops a wild lad out of a white manhole waving a pale guitar, as the aforementioned pink saloon threatens to disappear all together. For Inka has bottled that rarest of painterly prestidigitations: movement. That such a still thing as a painting could manifest motion nonstop through colors at once sparkling and somber and the roiling deck of changing perspective is pure magic.

Lower East Side proves once again why a great painting is just a dream deferred from artist's mind to studio to you. It is one of the all time greats and neither **Jeff Koons** nor **Damien Hirst** will ever equal it.

Inka Essenhigh, "The Old New Age," Jan. 23-Feb. 20, 2010, at 303 Gallery, 547 West 21st Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

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