

ARTFORUM

Shara Hughes

MARLBOROUGH CHELSEA

Art, drugs, dreams: The trifecta for seeing new things without going anywhere came together in Shara Hughes's terrific show "Trips I've Never Been On." Juggling various meanings of *trip*, the eight roughly five-foot-tall psychedelic landscapes on view (one was even called *Mushroom Hunt*) were crammed with color and textured vibrations, brought into high relief by various mixes and handlings of oil, acrylic, spray, enamel, caulk, and Flashe vinyl paint on canvas. I found it nearly impossible to fully describe any one painting: Objects became space and sensation mid-scene.

Along with *Mushroom Hunt*, 2015, several titles invoked the direct communion of vision and nature sought by American transcendentalism in the nineteenth century, as in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "transparent eyeball." The trope of peering through an ocular opening onto the world has solid precedents in the Hudson River School and Romantic painters, who employed cave mouths, bramble edges, and cataracts to encircle central depths of field that suggest states of interior and exterior sublime—or at least expansiveness. Hughes provided a unique contemporary take, channeling the particular weirdness of eyeballs and the refreshing incongruity of inner vision at a moment when our daily looking constitutes an endless minimizing and maximizing of virtual windows, and in which *optics* is more likely to refer to consumer reception than visible light.

A wobbly portal opens in the center of the loamy *Mushroom Hunt*, through which we see an idyllic, empty beach. In *Eye of the Swell*, 2016, a monotonous sea of patchy gray strokes is interrupted by a frame composed of teal waves that

break at the corners, which in turn bounds a stoplight structure of three circles, like some kind of nautical sextant. There are also the mysterious central orbs of *Long Distance Peers*, 2016, which hint at a moon in the marshes but also at an unblinking animal. *I Spy*, 2016, purports to be a postcard of the tropics at night: all palm tree and watery reflection and a crescent moon so big and cartoonlike it looks like it should be dangling from a string. A yellow amoeba form spreads from the edges, as if slowly covering the scene it also frames—another painting altogether, oozing in.

Vision is further pulled apart in *Split Ends*, 2016, in which a meandering river carves out depth like the best of the Hudson River panoramas. Things take an ominous, Loraxian turn: The whole scene has been dipped in hellish red, and a distant tree eerily resembles a smokestack. That "split" in the title is everywhere: The picture is cropped by a figure-eight frame suggesting airplane windows, creating binocular vision; the river divides the land; a tree trunk lies felled in two on the ground.

My favorite painting was *We Windy*, 2015, which nods to the magical realism of some folk-art compositions. A primary trunk of blue, yellow, and red stripes (or perhaps three separate trunks) arcs in a strong breeze, flame-like leaves blowing with auratic sway. The tree (or trees) takes up the middle of the picture; we can see a simple landscape unspool behind it, with green rolling hills and another tree like a bent, lit match. On a distant brown mountain, in incredible miniature, a third tree bucks in the wind. The scene is framed by two unruffled birches in the foreground whose leaves are a Seurat-like confetti of autumn colors. *Something Special*, 2015, also stars a tree on a hill, bordered by a pattern that feels like terrain on a sunnier day, peeled back and fractured into chips of color. Far more liquid is the landscape in the show's straightest painting, *Twisted*, 2016, which looks as if Franz Marc, Charles Burchfield, and Jennifer Bartlett spent some time together in a Florida bayou. Leaving behind any solid state, vines and trunks turn into dripping, hanging color.

Look at these works from a distance and you begin to see them as dioramas, their elaborate framing like so many sets and scrims placed at different depths. The effect is trippy, wonderful; a conjured scene that holds multiple visions in check without closing any windows.

—Prudence Peiffer

Shara Hughes,
We Windy, 2015,
oil, acrylic, Flashe
paint, and enamel
on canvas, 68 x 60".

