

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS LOS ANGELES

Shara Hughes

David Kordansky Gallery

By Suzanne Hudson



Shara Hughes, *The Kiss*, 2023, oil, acrylic, and dye on canvas, 115 × 72".

For Shara Hughes's first show in Los Angeles, "Light the Dark," she sundered her works across three galleries, initially intending two of the spaces to be respectively dedicated to "light" and "dark" paintings, with the third room serving to connect them. In the course of installing them, things got muddled. The staging of pictorial oppositions became less discrete, with the hang productively redoubling internal contrasts between luminosity and opacity. (This effect had the additional benefit of acknowledging changes in perspective, which the works in themselves thematized.) These new and extra-large-size canvases—dense with vegetation, cut with cascading waterfalls, and open to lambent clearings of meadow or sky—were willfully concocted. Convolutions of liquidly rendered space proved untenable as planes failed to align, and water tipped, impossibly, from vantages that flummoxed cues of perspective; without people in the compositions, such fantastic detournements complicate projective tendencies of looking. Each scene seemed to harbor its own light sources, using such brilliance to draw viewers. But entering a vista is not the same thing as finding a stable place to rest once inside. In interviews, Hughes has been adamant about the drive to formal invention that landscape allows, and she suggested as much here in conspicuously dappled and smeared passages that luxuriated in the magic of conjuring volume from a mark, or of intimating recession where there was only flatness.

In upholding, however residually, the conceit of day and night—descriptive as well as allegorical, one cannot help but assume—Hughes likewise drew attention to the relations of color (its saturation and placement, internal scale and modulation) on which this project relied. Fauvism was an obvious source. More broadly, the affective registers of palette to sublimate memory and mood—or simply to produce them—frame Hughes's interest in expressivity (which is not the same thing as communication; the personal, associative triggers for such compositions are for her alone). Hughes is especially good at creating temperatures, felt as much as seen. *The Hangdog*, 2023, is a crisp nocturne: A brilliant flower swings in moonlight, bowed as if in reverie or disappointment (or worse), arcing on a long slender stalk that further suggests a pendulum. *Burn Out*, 2023, one of the two horizontally oriented works in the mix, blazes hot, its fiery sun—is it rising or setting?—pervading an expanse that one experiences as thick and humid. These are mutable terrains, prone to shifts of atmosphere and to the more sustained and deleterious consequences of changes that occur more slowly than any real-time event. *Hot Coals*, 2022, intimates a consumptive world, a conflagration in chartreuse and magenta, presided over by a near-phosphorescent orb.

Gesine Borchardt has written of Hughes: "In the history of art, landscape as a genre has traditionally been dominated by men. Hughes, however, paints like those predecessors never existed." I might qualify this to read that she paints as if those predecessors came and went, much remaining outside their purview, with an acute disinterest in realism. Perhaps the quality of heavy ornamentation—or the way she uses the genre as a cipher for the will to conquer in its imperatives to knowledge, categorization, and possession—makes Hughes's compositions seem unreal. *Swelling*, 2023, a massive diptych, presses waves of water to the physical edge of the supports, as though they were buffering a monsoon. The compositions' concentrated patterns played out as individual events that also

contrast against the whole (to wit: *A Forest for the Trees*, 2023), upending coherence. But still the profusion of drunkenly Edenic mash-ups seduced, with *The Kiss*, 2023, referencing an 1859 painting by Francesco Hayez—and a none-too-subtle imaging of an embrace—in the entangling of flora on a woodland floor before a prismatic screen of trunks that evoke the colored translucency of stained glass. As does a strain of naturalist writing from Rachel Carson to Richard Powers, Hughes refuses to disambiguate subject from object, highlighting our deeply imbricated connection to the natural world, and maybe holding out hope that necessary fictions will not be all that remains of them.