

MORGAN LEHMAN

535 West 22nd Street, New York, New York 10011

The New Criterion

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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

On “Amy Lincoln” at Morgan Lehman Gallery; “Paul Resika: Recent Paintings” at Lori Bookstein Fine Art; “Rob de Oude: Tilts & Pinwheels” at DM Contemporary; and “Thornton Willis: Step Up” at Elizabeth Harris Gallery.



Amy Lincoln, Spring Moonlight, acrylic on panel, 34 x 24 inches/Courtesy: Morgan Lehman Gallery

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The challenge facing a realist painter is often not how to portray the visible world but rather how to visualize the unseen. Like the separation of man from beast, the pursuit of the ineffable separates art from illustration. To get from one to the other requires a leap of faith, and, for much of art history, that faith was Faith. In modern times, the fracturing of religious consensus has not so much dampened realism's spiritual interest, as might be expected, but rather placed artists in an even more central role as both shamans and craftsmen. In making manifest their own sense of the unseen, they advance their own spiritual programs.

There can be little doubt that bunk and questionable faith, from Theosophy to Mammonism, have often informed modern art's spiritual expression. At the same time, it must be said that bearing witness—even (perhaps especially) false witness—has led to much of modern art's visual charisma.

An interest in animism, or a belief in the spiritual animation of animal, vegetable, and mineral, has produced some of modernism's most arresting visual expressions of the natural world. In the first half of the last century, the American artist Charles Burchfield, for example, looked to reproduce not just woods and fields but also "the feelings of woods and fields, memories of seasonal impressions." Painting nature with redolent waves and golden halos surrounding bushes and trees, Burchfield wrote, "I like to think of myself—as an artist—as being in a nondescript swamp, up to my knees in mire, painting the vital beauty I see there, in my own way, not caring a damn about tradition, or anyone's opinion."

The painter Amy Lincoln follows in Burchfield's muddy footsteps, looking not only to plant life but also to what might be considered the inner life of plants. Drawing on the obsessive horticultural precisionism of Henri Rousseau, Lincoln incorporates an outsider-artist sensibility for symmetry, overgrowth, and oversaturated color. Now at Morgan Lehman Gallery in Chelsea, she is showing a selection of her smaller acrylics on panel, all created in the last year.¹

Lincoln has been focusing on the life of plants since I first began seeing her work in the off-grid galleries of Bushwick several years ago. Over time these still life's have become more active, energized by increasingly surreal colors, ominous forms, and ever stranger settings. Following a residency last year at Wave Hill, the stunning horticultural estate overlooking the Hudson River in the Bronx, and one with consistently excellent artist programs, Lincoln has incorporated a wider variety of plants in her paintings along with architectural details from the garden grounds. Greenhouse windows, Hudson River ice floes, and the cliffs of the Palisades have all appeared in recent work.

At Morgan Lehman, the beaux-arts balustrade of Wave Hill's terraced gardens peeks out from behind several of her compositions and unites the work together. This selection may be Lincoln's most uncharted and otherworldly. Sun, moon, and stars illuminate blood leaf, caladium, taro, and rubber plants with unnatural light. Colors shift in radiating waves and give her leafy shapes, rendered up close, an ominous presence.

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Amy Lincoln, Pink Caladium, 2016, Acrylic on Panel, 20 x 16 inches/Courtesy: Morgan Lehman Gallery

At times the hyperreality can become cartoonish. Her stars in *Caladium Study* (2016) would have been better left as single sources of light rather than rendered as five-pointers. The same goes for her sun waves in *Veranda Study*, which seem drawn from a box of Kellogg's.

Yet aside from its overdone lunar craters, the most unsettling and successful work in the exhibition is *Spring Moonlight*, a mountain landscape of pink-purple light and daffodils. Here the strangeness is so overdone, so saturated, that the image verges on kitsch. Yet like a velvet painting of Elvis, the composition also fully inhabits a world of its own idols and idolatry. Whether we should believe in it, or whether Lincoln even believes in it, is an open question, and one we should enjoy trying to answer.