



LINDA CHRISTENSEN

BAY AREA FIGURATIVE;
A NEW PERSPECTIVE



A woman sits or stands alone, or perhaps two women, but each one still alone. Their inner life is conveyed by stance, individuality defined by the crook of an arm, lift of a shoulder, tilt of a head. Linda Christensen's fascination with the revelatory qualities of instinctive, unpremeditated embodied expression is the stimulus for her own art. A practiced dancer, Christensen has an intuitive grasp of body language on a par with her grasp of color and compositional structure. The urge to explore and describe this intimate physical language motivates her to pick up her brushes, and drives her passion for making art.

Finding her way back to painting after a twenty-plus year hiatus for marriage and family, Christensen returned to school, earning a Bachelor of Arts and graduate degree from the University of California, Santa Cruz. While there, she discovered the San Francisco Bay Area Figurative group of painters, in particular artist David Park whose work especially caught her attention. Park had broken with pure Abstract Expressionism to found a new genre that returned the figure to painting just when most had considered it irrelevant.

Christensen was captivated by his composition of a woman hanging her laundry—which evoked a visceral memory of her mother—and by his gestural swaths of color. Park's dramatic handling of paint and his deft integration of figures resonated deeply with her.

Except for a few forays into landscape and interiors, Christensen's own work also revolves around the human figure. No doubt her encounter with David Park's approach, and her subsequent esteem for his fellow Bay Area figurative artist Richard Diebenkorn helped to cement her own inclinations toward figurative abstraction. Diebenkorn's influence is especially apparent in her handling of the picture plane, where depth is indicated through juxtaposing panels of blended color and creamy brushstrokes. But, as a devoted and observant people watcher, Christensen is always more interested in the emotional undercurrents inherent in ordinary human experience, and so seeks that elusive moment when a person turns inward and "reconnects" with their interior self. Christensen's unidentifiable women subjects are neither young



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nor old, and operate much like an archetype. Her depictions of them absorbed in contemplation or immersed in solitary activity acknowledge her empathy with a few noted artists whose influence she freely admits. French Impressionist Berthe Morisot, one of the first artists to portray women with their families at home, photographer Dorothea Lange, one of the first to examine women's struggle with poverty, and American realist painter Edward Hopper, one of the first to depict the eerie solitariness of city life, are all stances reflected in her work.

Christensen is a committed artist who spends long hours every day in her studio. She often begins painting abstractly and without a distinct idea, laying on color to help establish a flow. She will add in figures and other compositional elements with a quick sketch, then flesh them out with generous quantities of paint blended on her table-sized palette, or with sharp-edged blocks of color applied with a palette knife. An expressionist at heart, she mostly foregoes drawing noting, "a line not perfectly straight... the humanness of it, is emotional for me." As she

works, figures and their surroundings emerge with equal vigor, constructed and defined exclusively through the addition or subtraction of layers of paint. Of this process she says, "I never draw an arm, it's just what's left. I'd rather draw negative space."

In recent works, Christensen has incorporated areas of pattern into her paintings, designing and constructing her own stencils for the process. This innovation has allowed her to break with repetitive habits and expanded her outlook. In the painting, *Night Sky*, 2015, she makes good use of the inclusion of only a few rows of blue dots. Their subtle, seemingly incidental presence adds an unexpected lightness to a quiet moment, and the intersecting blues work to unite the palette and pull the solitary figure more deeply into the scene.

A more complex and dynamic use of pattern makes a big impact in Christensen's painting *Host*, 2015. The single waiting figure, her shoulders slightly raised as she grips the chair, is immersed in and defined by richly blended zones of color and

areas of variously sized dots and plant forms. The work evokes Henri Matisse's brightly patterned Fauvist arrangements, and Édouard Vuillard's dazzling but somewhat claustrophobic interiors. Christensen's eye for color is truly adventurous, and the play of rusty oranges and complementary blues set against muted greens and creams, not to mention her daring touches of pure black, make this painting shimmer.

Christensen takes her Matisse-Vuillard inflected interiors out into nature with the powerful painting *Journal*, 2015. Two women pose side-by-side, a little too far apart to imply true intimacy—their stances not quite harmonious. Matching white dresses glow fiercely with strong summer light, and despite the riotous fields of brilliant oranges, reds, and yellows, the women anchor and dominate the scene. Their bluish shadows mirror the smeary blues of the sea and draw the composition together. Interspersed areas of pattern, dotted with goldenrod ovals and red diamonds add the element of detail, a visual surprise in the otherwise loose, open fields of color. Again Christensen drenches us with her saturated palette and vivid



juxtapositions of color. Placing two bright white figures at center set against a ground of advancing hot color is a daring move, which she pulls off with stunning success. The two mysteriously intriguing figures leave us wanting to know more.

Christensen commits herself emotionally to each work she creates. Her paintings are imbued with personal intention and expression—an attitude she feels is crucial for her own or for any valid artistic endeavor. Her figurative subjects may exist in a hushed arena of stilled time or in lush gardens of color, and whether she conjures them caught in mid stride, distracted, contemplative, or working, they are portrayed without false sentimentality. The seemingly uneventful moments she depicts are in fact made momentous by her recognition of embodied human expression and her eye for color and composition. Christensen actively seeks out those things we miss, and works to honor and beautify them in her art.

Helaine Glick
Curatorial Advisor



Cover:

Host, 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches

Inside Flap:

Night Sky, 2015, oil on canvas, 32 x 22 inches

Inside Panels:

Distant, 2015, oil on canvas, 30 x 20 inches

Journal, 2015, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches

Red Bag, 2015, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

Back Cover:

Shoe, 2014, oil on board, 24 x 24 inches

All paintings courtesy of the artist and Winfield Gallery

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