

Elena Manero

Contingencias

Art Review
by Shana Nys Dambrot
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Elena Manero's paintings occupy multiple dimensions simultaneously, expressing in deftly crafted compositions a paradox at the heart of human experience – the psyche's power to live in the past and the present at the same time. Merging self-portraiture with renderings of vintage photographs through a projection motif evocative of Cindy Sherman's film stills, Manero's gift for photorealism borders on trompe l'oeil. Her narrative sensibility of additive layering collapses time and space into single instances in which both are implicated, and each co-informs and contextualizes the reality of the other. For this compositional (and therefore narrative) origami to succeed, her skill must be and is impeccable – she enacts an unassailable naturalism that is so real it creates an impossibility. Her habit of working mostly in monochrome helps smooth over temporal digressions to create a unified experiential field. That's how her paintings work formally – how they function as biography and poetry is another matter.



In a deep maroon, we see Manero shielding her eyes from the light of the “projected” image: a party, some special occasion in a crowded family home. In lavender it's a close-up of a couple, possibly a wedding picture. In teal we see her back as she peers into a domestic scene whose shadows trace a ghostly woman's face like a tattoo across her back. In emerald her hand reaches out toward and thereby obscures a regal portrait. She watches a church scene through a window, quite literally on the outside looking in, but also looking back; extremely separate, we watch over her shoulder, we are outside with her and see what she sees. In others she faces the audience, more assertive about turning her back on literal images of the past.

But this “past” is not Manero's past – or at least it's not only hers. These are not her family albums, but it is the story of her generation. She uses found photographs as the stages she sets for herself – inserts herself into, critiques, inherits, transcends, honors, erases, updates, mulls over, empathizes with, resents – as both evidence of historic tradition and cultural heritage, and as well as indications of her lived struggles. Her paintings present mediated, message-driven autobiography as a version of something universal – imbuing an ageless art historical visual trope with a postmodern journey of self-discovery.