

MONYA ROWE GALLERY

504 West 22nd Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10011
212 255 5065

For Immediate Release

LARISSA BATES

Man Enough

November 18 – January 8, 2010

Opening reception: Thursday, November 18, 6-8 PM

PANEL DISCUSSION

Macho Man, Mother Man: Rethinking Masculinity

With Geoffrey Chadsey (Artist), Leidy Churchman (Artist), Thomas Lax (Curatorial Assistant at The Studio Museum in Harlem) and Hudson Taylor (Former University of Maryland Champion Wrestler)

Moderated by Colleen Asper (Artist, Co-Founder Ad Hoc Vox)

Organized by Larissa Bates

Saturday, December 11, 2 PM

Monya Rowe Gallery is pleased to announce a solo exhibition of paintings, drawings and video by **Larissa Bates** titled *Man Enough*.

An essay by **Stefanos Geroulanos** titled *Struggle, Ground, State of Nature* accompanies the exhibition.

Perched as they are up against each other, one wonders if figure and ground ever meet. "Figure" in the present case stands for anyone or more of a set of characters, some of them muscular male wrestlers, calm amidst an artful struggle with one another, others small figures facing the viewer, saddened, almost cartoonish, tense, multiplied. And as "ground" we find majestic landscapes, mostly adopted and adapted from large-size landscape paintings or Japanese ukiyo-e style paintings. Larissa Bates' art lies in the crevice and struggle between the two: figure and ground never quite form a whole except in their disjunction, their non-belonging.

In some paintings, the ones organized by the proliferation of miniscule typecast characters ("misfits", "worriers", "lederhosen boys", "banana barons") and which I will thus call "character paintings," the effect is one of casting an ostensibly pastoral scene as a realm of anxiety and disorder. A central but localized scene organizes these paintings: it is often a scene of wrestlers, observed by some attending figures, ignored by others, ostensibly affecting yet a third group that is nevertheless not looking directly (but rather gazing out of the painting at toward us, crying or affecting a measure of terror. Paratactically dispersed into groupings, each of the attendants is doubled (and tripled), caricatured; representational disjunction guarantees the foreignness and unwelcoming character of the environment's beauty. So that here, the cute harmony that first strikes the viewer is immediately and profoundly undercut: in *Destiny's Child Dance* (2010) the two sets of three almost exhibitionistic Latina dancers are almost eaten up by the color scheme, while dark trees and secluded, partying little girls and "worriers" in yellow jackets punctuate a geography of harmony in an all too hysterical manner. (Is it the coated girls gazing away as if in possession of a secret that cannot be depicted, is it the dance that, in never quite vanishing, breaks out as it were in its all too well-imagined cloister. Multiple localized scenes compete for attention in *Ethel Walker's Girls and their Offspring* (Fig.1), the serialized offspring demanding attention from everyone in contact with them. *Misfits Jump Rope and Fight* (2010) deploys a self-parodying scene, with the wrestlers barely engaged in their match, mocked by "worriers," watching instead the hysterical "misfit" miniatures in the colorwise brighter foreground. Far from a Tale-of-Genji narrative, the force of these works lies in the decentered performance of quibbling, the gap between environmental comfort and minimal, serialized actions frozen in a very different instant than the seemingly timeless gardens surrounding them. This instant is itself thematized in some cases—for example the



say cheese! moment of the *Banana Barons* (Fig.2)—as a moment intended to mark the colonial exploitation of the title, an occasion of exaggerated glee atop the drowning symbols of the oppressed. (It is the exaggerated emotion and the repeated characters that unite this painting with the other "character paintings.")

By comparison, the wrestler paintings, often framed by diagonals from two or three sides, offer up superbly definite and centered scenes, theaters of figure as much as setting. Bates' (male) wrestlers reappear and struggle with one another across the different works they inhabit and occupy, from Bosch's and then Dürer and Baldung to Poussin, Goya and the German Romantics, they stand, temporally frozen, often in elegant and forceful holds, almost always amidst hard stones and rocks, foreboding trees, that never quite dissuade their scenes of camaraderie and even intimacy. Underwritten as it is by the almost-choreographed chances of victory and defeat—chances often telescoped into an instant, a victorious hold or an apparent pause in the middle of a movement—this intimacy contrasts strongly with the forbidding, hostile setting, which aggravates it. Its goal is not realism (as in Eakins' or Courbet's wrestlers, the former in their slender definitiveness, the latter in their brutality), but a serialization of basically the same scene across different milieus: this is the scene of a forceful wrestling clash: sometimes between the only two figures that exist in the painting's world (one thinks of Hegel on the struggle for recognition between different desires), sometimes between two in a group, observed attentively by the others (one thinks of a ritual that binds them together). The struggle/intimacy they are engaged in blinds them all to the hostile ground that threatens to hurt them only instants after the painting, and thus doubles itself as a struggle between the two figures and this ground itself, the athletes pressing against their world and finding a perverse comfort in its own contrast to them. It is as if they hover, ever so slightly, on the landscape they find themselves in. As opposed to the colonial implications of the character paintings, the wrestler paintings are signed by the detoured contrapuncto of two traditions: Greco-Roman figures and European depictions of nature.



If it is appropriate to say that landscapes and ukiyo-e serve as ground for the action, it is just as appropriate that the proliferation and distribution of typified personae constitute the ground for the separate images. Across paintings, the landscape and action deploys itself around them; it's as if their repetitive centering of the paintings administers their environments and landscapes. Serving as the painting's visual grammar, the repeated figures guarantee, each time, its singularity amidst the broader body of work; if the latter's theme is struggle, the repeated images offer an opening to the struggle's hue and fabric. In *Head Honchos Capture Mother Man and Rock Man* (Fig.3), the pink-dress "criers" on the left mark disaster and powerlessness; but in *Misfits Jump Rope and Fight* (2010) they code the center of attention, the unstable little party descending into tears of frustration. By intending disharmony, repetition extends the different kinds of room surrounding the characters, bringing the backgrounds to a life dominated if not ordered by these characters themselves.



In the wrestler paintings, our need for some kind of narration (how did this realm become a habitat for the wrestlers? what are its edges and horizons?) finds itself denied. Bates' intervention in the painting she has adopted is brutal in its gentleness. The different styles are rendered moot, indifferent, while the original size is adjusted and characters are dispensed with. Comparing Bates's painting (Fig.4) to Lucas van Uden's (1595-1672) *Alpine Landscape* (Fig.5) offers immediate clues: van Uden's painting is not only about twice as large as Bates', but it depicts a vast space with miniscule figures, figures that would barely compare in size to the shoes of Bates' comparatively huge wrestlers. Goya's *The Fall* undergoes a similar treatment, with Goya's imposing tree under which a woman has fallen from her donkey being reduced to something barely taller than the gigantesque hunched baby-face facing his opponent and us. Suffice it to say then that Bates' wrestlers have, at least in one sense, mastered their environment: they are frozen alive in the very painting they stand against, their struggle has enslaved the painting itself. The wrestlers have similarly depopulated it of its original "inhabitants," they have ejected Psyche from Paul Bril's *Landscape with Psyche and Jupiter*, and even the holy family from Hans Baldung Grien's *Holy Family in Landscape*.

What Bates uses to replace the religious scenes is, in a sense, just as religious: the ritual of the struggle, the corporeal intimacy, the non-violence of the fight, the organization of gazes (in the *Shark Group* (Fig.6), for example), the domination of the original painting yet also the domination of the wrestlers' space for struggle by that painting's ostensible backdrop. What emerges in the combination of these elements, we find the reiteration of a scene that nevertheless facilitates compellingly different compositions, is a state-of-nature myth that hints at once at a European and often Christian background while depleting these hints of any assurance. What replaces the original paintings' assurance is a highly ritualized dance that promises nothing beyond the intimacy of the depicted fight.



If the wrestler paintings replay and deform a decidedly European tradition, the character paintings engage a colonial one. This intention is explicit on her part; not least in *Destiny's Child Dance* and *Banana Barons*. The ukiyo-e milieus Bates uses to deploy this argument remain a peculiar choice of setting: they appear almost decorative. Perhaps the simultaneous joy in and anxious refusal of decoration is the whole point here: even more than the wrestlers who raise paintings from their archival hibernation and replace their piety, turning them into milieus for a struggle that doubles upon itself, the character paintings counter the merely decorative sense invoked by their respective harmonious backgrounds through their manic figuration, their construction of a scene without past or future, without promises or calm.

This then would lead us to the ambition in Larissa Bates' struggles, namely the ambition to redeploy and transform that founding myth of a state of nature that early modern philosophers imagined to underlie or have preceded human society.



Bates' own paintings offer a starkly contemporary picture, in which this state almost postdates society, survives where society cannot. The society that should overlie or follow from this state has instead crumbled or been depleted to basic elements that persist as much in their dispersed everpresence as in their manic force. Nature reemerges out of these ruins, imagined not as existing in itself, but as surviving in forms detailed by the pictorial tradition. In Bates' hand, the nature becomes reworked to the point of being so pictorial as to bear little resemblance to any "original" nature it nevertheless still hints at. Scenes of struggle and intimacy, parody and anxious repetitiveness stand in mastery over this nature. They are scenes of the ciphers of society that persist in nature, that declare themselves as depictions of it as a state for humanity. In this state, human figures are few and society remains beyond the promise of these ciphers; fantasies of power persist, buoyed by the sense that regardless of its hostility, the milieu is itself

malleable, already dominated. And so, men continue to wrestle forever in gestures and holds confirming their dominance and self-assurance; caricatures attack, entrap, cry, flaunt themselves in gestures decrying reconciliation while bemoaning its impossibility. Society may be no more, and what is left behind becomes material for the persistent commitment to a nature whose glory and purity has outlived this society that first cast it.

Stefanos Geroulanos, 2010

Larissa Bates received a BA from *Hampshire College*, Massachusetts. This is her fourth solo exhibition at *Monya Rowe Gallery*. Her work has recently been exhibited at *Richard Heller*, Los Angeles, *Andrew Edlin Gallery*, New York (curated by Scott Hug) and in a solo exhibition at NADA Art Fair, Miami, exhibited by *Monya Rowe Gallery*. Bates lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Stefanos Geroulanos teaches European intellectual history at New York University and is the author of "An Atheism that is not Humanist Emerges in French Thought" (Stanford, 2010).

1. Larissa Bates, *Ethel Walker's Girls and Their Offspring*, 2010, acryla gouache and gold leaf on canvas, 10 by 8 inches
2. Larissa Bates, *Banana Barons with Tennis Raquets After David Alfaro Siqueiros*, 2010, gouache and gold leaf on paper, 7 by 10 inches
3. Larissa Bates, *Head Honchos Capture Mother Man and Rock Man*, gouache and ink on paper, 10 by 7 inches
4. Larissa Bates, *Wrestlers in Lucas Vanuden's Alpine Landscape*, acryla gouache and gold leaf on panel, 8 by 10 inches
5. Lucas van Uden's (1595-1672) *Alpine Landscape*
6. Larissa Bates, *Shark Group after George Stubbs and Sargent*, acryla gouache, oil, ink and gold leaf on canvas, 11 by 14 inches

Gallery Hours: Tuesday – Saturday 11-6 PM

Please note the gallery will be closed for Thanksgiving holiday Nov 25-26 and open by appointment only from Dec 23-Jan 3.

For more information or images please contact the gallery at 212 255 5065 or info@monyarowegallery.com

###