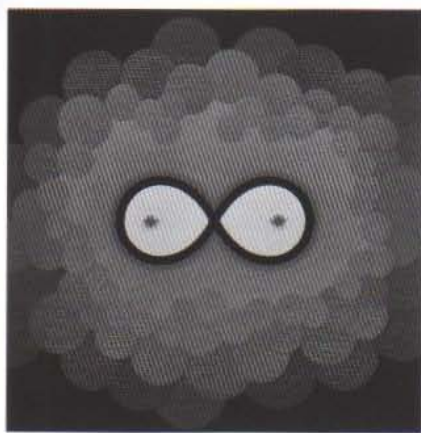


Linda Stark

at ANGLES, 19 November–8 January



There's nothing sexy about death, but its suggestion sure gives an edge to things. Linda Stark's four new paintings are steeped in this wisdom, calling death to mind by keeping it at bay—but just barely. Her seductively creepy exhibition of surgically built-up (sometimes carefully carved) oils on canvas and panel functions as a type of highbrow Halloween: a participatory event that brooks no compromises despite its accessibility. Before these easy-to-read, three-dimensional emblems, connoisseurs of unlikely enthusiasms are treated to tricks that do not deceive so much as they lead to unexpected effects, drawing interested parties deeper and deeper into the darkness at the heart of Stark's art. Here, clear-cut answers disappear as stubborn conundrums take over, leaving viewers suspended over a peculiarly contemporary vision of The Void: an openly melodramatic and seemingly bottomless pit filled with meaninglessness—or perhaps nothing at all.

Getting to the bottom of things is hardly Stark's goal, however, in these subtly chilling pictures that combine the vividness of flash cards with the rippled artificiality of Naugahyde and the well-mannered formality of embossed invitations to significant social occasions, be they matrimonial or funereal. Putting off the end by embracing its proximity, her wickedly slippery instances of theatrical masquerade demonstrate that sometimes the truth lies on the surface of things, where it can be evoked, intimated, and hinted at—even if it cannot be firmly grasped or known in its fullness.

The threat of death takes seemingly simple shape in *Black Widow Portrait III* (all works, 1999), in which Stark links a

viewer's fascination with a perfectly made-up mouth to the poisonous bite of the legendary spider. A pair of lipstick-red shapes on a jet-black ground echoes the hourglasslike markings on the back of black widows, simultaneously recalling the middle-sections of a pair of pursed lips, poised to give a kiss or perhaps merely caught in mid-sentence, pronouncing a particularly sexy sibilant.

In *Ophelia Forever*, the results of death couldn't look better. Framed by the figure-eight symbol denoting infinity, a nice pair of fleshy breasts—with unsettlingly realistic, three-dimensional nipples—floats in a squeaky clean swirl of pastel-blue bubbles, whose loosely concentric format shares more with animated cartoons, the formality of Shakespearean tragedy, and art's capacity for closure than with the messy details of everyday life's ongoing dramas. Stark's portrait of a lovesick teen suicide stands in pointed contrast to her suggestive invocation of femme fatales in her abstract portrait of the deadly spider, both in terms of the direction each creature turns its murderous impulses and, more importantly, in the ways each work engages viewers: subjecting us to deadly threats or emphasizing our powerlessness to stop tragic events from happening to others.

In Stark's other two paintings, death serves even more metaphorical purposes. Emblazoned in a two-foot-square expanse of flesh-colored paint with the raw irritation and swollen sensitivity of a new tattoo, *Jesus!* presents a cursive version of the Christian savior's name, inscribed in blood-red and adorned with three rainbow-tinted silhouettes of stylized flowers. Depending upon one's beliefs, Stark's painting could call to mind the triumph over death represented

by Christ's resurrection or simply articulate a secular exclamation nonbelievers sometimes emit when we cannot believe what happens right in front of our eyes.

Likewise, *Curtains* depicts the end of one thing that does not necessarily imply the end of the world. Based on the curtains that close at the end of a theatrical production—and on the common phrase to which this moment of artistic closure gave rise—her literally multilayered painting shows a radiant black sun, set in the dead-center of the targetlike composition, behind a pair of thick black curtains closing asymmetrically. Suggesting that artforms sometimes get reborn in later movements only to eventually die something like natural deaths, this haunting image casts its dark light over the rest of Stark's breakthrough pictures, which, with deathly stillness, all lay out what seem to be ultimate ends as beautifully composed beginnings.

David Pagan is a Los Angeles-based critic and instructor at Claremont Graduate University. He is a contributing editor to *Bomb* and Reviews Editor of *Art Issues*.

Linda Stark
Ophelia Forever, 1999
Oil on canvas on panel
24" x 24"