

theWeekly

Vol. 11 No. 25 June 18, 1986

Visual Arts

Modern-day cave painting By Doane Brolley



AMBER AND SIENNA STAG: USING PAINT FOR ITS TACTILE QUALITIES.

Valentina Dubasky
Hodges/Banks Gallery
through June 28

PAINTER VALENTINA DUBASKY relates a story about a walk one night in Vermont. By the light of the moon, she saw several large white cows. Admitted into her imagination, the shapes and outlines of these animals seem to be the perfect rectangles. For the past six years, through thick, impasto application of oil paint, the New York artist has painted distorted and fanciful depictions of deer and bison. We are fortunate to have the chance to follow her evolution as a painter with her current solo exhibit at the Hodges/Banks Gallery, oil paintings on paper and canvas as well as a suite of etchings and several recent experiments with mono types. The paintings take us from Altamira, Spain, to New York City, with compelling references to Paleolithic cave paintings and strong connections to past totemic cultures.

Like many of her image-oriented contemporaries, Dubasky's explorations with the shapes and outlines of animals have allowed her to leave the confines of abstraction and to paint figuratively, without the distractions of narrative content. Yet however provocative, Dubasky's animal images seem of secondary importance to the delight and gesture of painting. She paints without preconceptions about the outcome, which Dubasky says enables her to "trust in the chaos of process." The resulting images undulate between solid, recognizable forms and abstract masses of color.

Dubasky uses paint less for its emotional effect than for its visual, tactile qualities. With a heavily laden brush in a palette knife, she builds thick layers of color to produce lush painterly patterns. The resulting profusion of dense, choppy strokes runs the gamut from plums and pale pinks to amber and sienna with shocks of turquoise and black, allowing unselfconsciously for such titles

as Blue Antlered Stag in Plum.

The importance of travel for Dubasky is readily apparent. Visits to the case of Altamira, Spain and Lascaux, friends, fueled her interest in prehistoric art. The composition and simplicity of line used in the stag draw heavily from the source. The stag is crudely drawn in profile with its head turned exaggeratedly back towards the tail in much the same method used by primitive painters to handle the problems of perspective and foreshortening. Yet unlike the lyrical, free-floating animals of cave paintings, Dubasky's earlier stags seem routed. The picture plane has been cut in half horizontally by the use of lighter and darker shades of the same color in the upper and lower section of the canvas. The lighter Hugh given the upper half timidly conveys a sense of sky, landscape, a horizon line – a bothersome practice that interrupts the imaginative mood the paintings.

Her most recent paintings of bison are free of such interruptions. Returning to a truer vision

of the cave paintings, the horizontal division diminishes, allowing her to break the bond with the natural world. As her painting style becomes looser the edges blur, the imagery loses its intact shape and almost dissolves into the background. The lack of separation between foreground and background gives these paintings a spacious atmospheric quality. Scale is larger – color use more aggressive and animated. Present Tense is done in black, vivid blood-red, and garish varieties of green. The main image of a bison is shadowed by the ghost-like outline of another. Dubasky's interest in surface texture has been refined; no longer content with their stylistic references to cave painting, the surface of her canvas has become the cave wall.

In taking this step, Dubasky stretches the artistic continuum to include pre-lingual cave imagery and her own bold figurative expressionism, leaving us with paintings woven from the power of the capstone Age that promise a future full of potential.