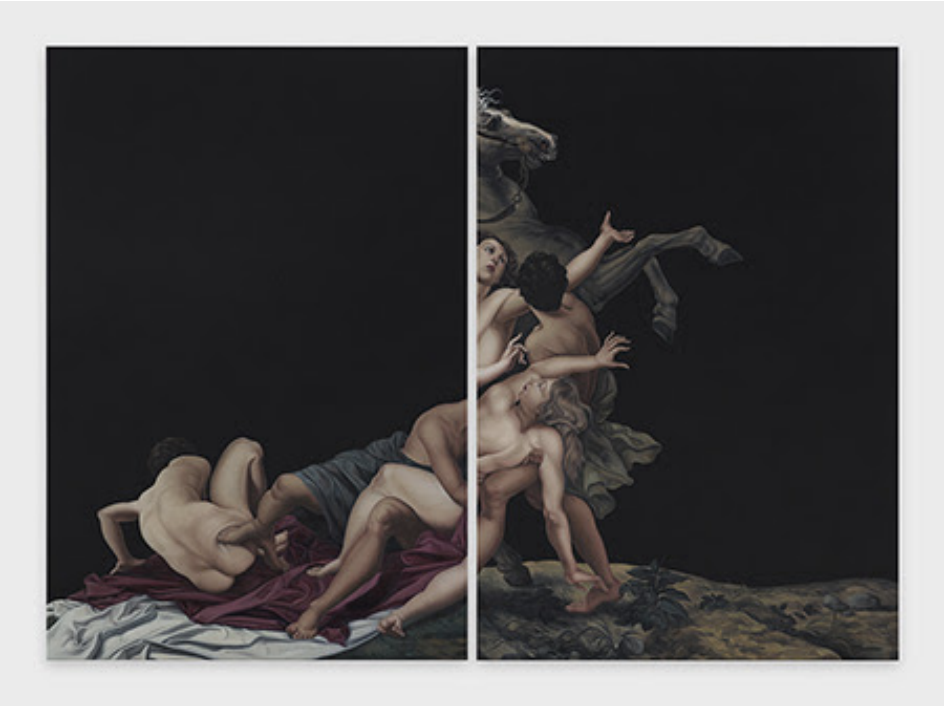
Lindsay Preston Zappas, "Snap Reviews: Jesse Mockrin at Night Gallery," Carla, December 13, 2018

carla

Snap Reviews



From a black abyss, a hand holds a pair of scissors, ready to snip a lock of hair from a dark-haired figure whose face hides beyond the canvas edge. This painting, *Some Unknown Power* (all works 2018), hangs in *Syrinx*, Jesse Mockrin's current Night Gallery exhibition. The scene reminds of Samson and Delilah—that old tale about a treacherous woman cutting the hair of her lover, stripping him of his strength. In the Biblical telling, Samson is lauded as the victim and hero, and Delilah is the whore, the betrayer. While this story clearly celebrates a patriarchal perspective, Mockrin's painting eschews any comprehensive narrative and muddies notions of protagonist/antagonist, adding in extra limbs from unseen characters, and denying any identifiable gender clues.

Four large diptychs span the exhibition and the empty white space between the dual canvases reads like a missed frame in a movie reel. *Abduction* borrows motifs from rape scenes in paintings by both Rubens and Janssens, and, indeed, at first glance a rape appears to be underway: a body is pinned underneath an abductor on the left canvas. Though, both figures

here (unlike their historical counterparts) are somewhat androgynous, with all defining features hidden. On the right, the same victim rises in a tangle of bodies and horse limbs. These shifting roles and blurring body parts leave the eye jumping, attempting to make sense of Mockrin's open-ended narratives.

In the title painting, *Syrinx* (also a diptych), the god Pan pursues a woman called Syrinx. In Greek fable, Syrinx transforms into reeds to escape, and Pan then fashions a set of pipes out of them/her; her transfigured self cut down and used for an instrument of entertainment. Again Mockrin quotes art history. The right half of the diptych closely imitates a 1723 Coypel painting of the subject. Almost verbatim to Coypel's version, Mockrin's painting depicts Pan's familiar hands grasping through the reeds, Syrinx fleeing and just out of reach. Replicating this scene here does little to overtly move this narrative of female objectification further, however: is simply depicting injustice in itself a subversion?

The exhibition is at its best when laboriously painted, twisting limbs read as androgynous—their roles in scenes confused—or when flexed digits, skipped frames, and cropped views make any simple read impossible. These deliberately ambiguous tangles of bodies skew historical or assumed power dynamics (and depictions), undermining classical Western histories (art or otherwise) that feature men's glories at the expense of vulnerable women. Yet, where Mockrin quotes her forbearers too closely, familiar stories of female objectification feel more stuck in the past than visions of an empowered future.

December 1–January 19