



Linda Stark MATRIX 250 OCTOBER 18 – DECEMBER 22, 2013
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

“There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.” —Julia Kristeva¹

The paintings of Linda Stark occupy an indeterminate space where personal and universal themes interweave, producing a series of fragmented portrayals not only of her own lived experience but also those of a larger social body. Predominantly small in scale, objects she can easily manipulate and rotate with her hands, her paintings reflect an interior world (psychological, spiritual, and intellectual) as much as they index the shared exterior world (cultural, environmental, and mundane). In this way, Stark’s work operates on a threshold of bodily experience, with the luscious tactility of her surfaces acting as markers of a material reality, while her treatment of the subject matter steers the viewer to consider what lies beyond. “One could say I’m a confessional artist,” states Stark, “the work is personal, though I believe that it is through the intensely personal that one can make work that is telling of the human condition, relating to all of humanity.”²

Although often beginning from a specific encounter in Stark’s life, her extended process—she often spends years on a single painting—involves unmooring her subjects from a finite time and place, so that they adopt a more symbolic, evanescent status, what she refers to as “resonant.” While working as a temp in a law firm, for instance, Stark became fixated with the herringbone weave pattern of the hardwood floor and started to consider the possibilities of working with this intricate motif in oil. *White Weave* (1992) is one of many canvases that developed out of this quotidian moment. In order to make each of her “Weave” paintings, a signature style, she allows a thick, viscous drip of oil paint to form across the canvas, which takes several hours to congeal. Stark’s drips are a far cry from the slapdash, all-over spontaneity of Jackson Pollock’s; instead, hers are gradually and methodically built-up, and yet just as masterful. She patiently waits for the individuated lines to dry before adding yet another layer on top—a process that in its entirety can take upward of a year to complete. Furthermore, for Stark the weave pattern evokes women’s work and the Homeric tale of Penelope, who endlessly wove a shroud in order to avoid her eager suitors while waiting for Odysseus’s return. Similarly, *Black Widow Portrait III* (1999) is one of many paintings Stark executed as a result of a real black-widow infestation of her former studio and her daily observation of the spiders. In an attempt to confront her fear of these arachnids, she began to paint nighttime portraits of them, isolating the distinctive red hourglass pattern found on their abdomen, raising it in an embossed detail against a black background. Like Penelope, known as the embodiment of the virtuous, faithful wife who patiently waits decades for her husband, the black widow is also an infamous feminine archetype. Yet the black widow represents the inverse of Penelope: the femme fatale, the female destroyer who cannibalizes her mate after sex.

Indeed, Stark’s practice radiates around an intense interrogation of cultural, and largely feminine, archetypes. She gravitates toward charged, forbidden imagery, often confronting that which is taboo, overused, and abject. In *Coat of Arms* (1991), she lifts a diagram of the endometrium from the

popular feminist volume *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, presenting the female uterus in gold paint against a dark red background; the edges of the canvas drip like coagulated menstrual blood. In this painting, Stark transgresses the cultural norm of what is representable, entering the unbounded, liquid terrain of the abject, what Julia Kristeva describes as a corporeal place of both inside and outside, existing “beyond the limit.”³ Stark further examines fluid (bodily and painterly) states in *Untitled (Two Fountains)* (1991) where blood seemingly streams forth from two nipples (presumably of female breasts) set amid a fleshy, tactile ground, eventually dripping down off the canvas’s edge. In *Fixed Wave* (2011), one of her “Adorned” paintings that conflate a bejeweled body with painting, she shifts to a cooler temperature, depicting a cropped image of a magnified teal-blue female body with meticulously textured skin. The image is filtered through a pop vernacular with the superimposition of a crested wave (a cliché of landscape painting) over a caricatured rendering of a woman’s vagina. Silver beads of a belly-button ring dangle above like opalescent moons. Continuing her investigation of overused imagery, Stark fuses an exhausted sign with a forbidden one, in effect creating a new image that is equal parts alluring and unsettling.

This pattern repeats in *Black Hole* (2008), initially made for a site-specific group exhibition in Los Angeles entitled *Mel’s Hole*, for which artists were invited to consider a story about “an alleged bottomless hole on someone’s property that had mysterious properties, and when they lowered things down Mel’s hole, they came back up changed, reversed, or dead.”⁴ For Stark’s contribution, she considers a sign that has also undergone a transformation, the swastika, sculpting its lines out of ridges of dripped oil paint. The swastika in its original form is an ancient Sanskrit symbol that signifies good and a positive life force—Stark’s painting shows this original orientation. Notoriously, however, the Nazis adopted the symbol, rotating it forty-five degrees clockwise. Through their appropriation, the symbol came to represent evil and death—the very opposite of its original signification. Stark reflects on this transposition of a sacred form through the profane, and how the meaning of this symbol was negated over time. To this end she poignantly aligns its form with a black hole: “things go in and come out corrupted.”

Stark’s process is not only an assiduous interrogation of symbolic forms, but also of the medium of paint. Indeed her inventive, technical expertise is a hallmark of her painting. Perhaps this is most pronounced in *Stigmata* (2011), an exacting portrait of her left palm incised with the word “feminist” that took her nearly five years to complete, often while employing a magnifying lens. Here again she conflates the biographical with larger cultural signifiers: the Christian stigmata and the word “feminist.” In effect she recuperates a highly charged social term, literally branding it into her hand, and tempts the viewer to read the word as her biography (that art-historical methodology that continues to plague female artists) through highly defined striations of paint. As in much of her oeuvre, Stark here renders the corporeal on the verge of multiple states—physical, cultural, and metaphysical—yielding a sublimated version of each.

Apsara DiQuinzio
CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR



- 1 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.
- 2 Personal communication
- 3 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.
- 4 Personal communication

THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE SUPPORT OF THE BAM/PFA TRUSTEES.

Biography

Born in San Diego in 1956, Linda Stark lives and works in Los Angeles. The artist received a B.A. from University of California, Davis (1978), and an M.F.A. from University of California Irvine (1985). Over the last twenty years, she has exhibited in numerous solo exhibitions at Angles Gallery, Los Angeles; as well as at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; and Feigen Contemporary, Chicago. Her work has been featured in selected group exhibitions as varied as *Viva La Raspberries* (organized by the artist Evan Halloway), Harris Lieberman Gallery, New York; *Meticulosity*, Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles; *FINDS! The Unusual Object*, FOCA Curator's Lab, Los Angeles; *Unfinished Paintings*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles; *Desire: Six Los Angeles Artists*, Pasadena Museum of California Art, Pasadena; *L.A. Paint*, Oakland Museum of California, Oakland; and *Mel's Hole*, California State Fullerton Grand Central Arts Center, Santa Ana; among many others. She is the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artist Fellowships, a California Arts Council Fellowship, and a COLA Visual Artist Fellowship.

Public Program

Artist's Talk Friday, October 18, 6:30 p.m.

Linda Stark presents an illustrated overview of her work

Works in the exhibition

Coat of Arms, 1991
Oil on canvas
17 ½ × 22 ½ × 2 ½ in.
Collection of the artist

Untitled (Two Fountains), 1991
Oil on canvas
10 × 11 × 1 ¾ in.
Collection of Charles Desmarais and Kitty Morgan

Black Cross, 1992
Oil on canvas
12 × 12 × 2 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

White Weave, 1992
Oil on canvas
13 × 13 ½ in.
Collection of Marcia Goldenfeld Maiten and Barry David Maiten

Olden Love (End of the Rainbow), 1995
Oil on canvas over panel
7 ¾ × 7 ¾ × 2 ¼ in.
Collection of Linda Yeaney

Five Finger Flame, 1995
Oil on panel
14 × 10 ½ in.
Collection of Bruce Chernof

Silver That Girl, 1998
Oil on panel
12 × 10 ¼ × 1 ¼ in.
Collection of David Tonnemacher

Black Widow Portrait III, 1999
Oil on canvas over panel
24 × 24 × 2 in.
Collection of Dallas Price-Van Breda and Bob Van Breda

Portrait of Harry, 2000
Oil on canvas over panel
7 ½ × 7 ½ × 1 ½ in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Nuggets, 2007
Oil and polyclay on canvas over panel
36 × 36 × 3 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Ruins, 2008
Oil and wood on canvas over panel
36 × 36 × 3 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Black Hole, 2008
Oil on wood
8 × 8 × 2 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Brand, 2010
Oil on canvas over panel
36 × 36 × 3 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Stigmata, 2011
Oil on canvas over panel
36 × 36 × 3 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

The Eight Ball, 2011
Oil on canvas over panel
12 × 12 × 2 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Fixed Wave, 2011
Oil on canvas over panel
36 × 36 × 3 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

Fossil, 2011
Oil and bugs on canvas over panel
12 × 12 × 2 in.
Courtesy of Angles Gallery, Los Angeles

FRONT
Nuggets, 2007. Photo: Brian Forrest

FAR LEFT
White Weave, 1992. Photo: Fredrick Nilsen
Black Widow Portrait III, 1999. Photo: Brian Forrest

NEAR LEFT
Stigmata, 2011. Photo: Brian Forrest