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The Magic of Twilight: Inka Essenhigh on Working Fast and Being Timeless

[print](#)

by **Rupert Goldsworthy**

Inka Essenhigh: New Editions & Monoprints at Pace Prints Chelsea

March 5 – April 16, 2011

521 West 26th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues,

New York City, (212) 629 6100



Inka Essenhigh, *Centaur*, 2010. Oil paint monotype printed from a steel matrix, 11-3/4 x 13-3/4 inches.
Published by Pace Editions, Inc.?

Inka Essenhigh's paintings flit between abstraction and representation. Populated by a cosmology of figures that appear surreal and distended, they draw from her own very particular if perverse psycho-architectural interior world.

Her work has been described as both "exotic and operatic." Critics cite 19th-century caricatures, oriental art, Arabic miniatures, and contemporary comics as influences. Other references that come to mind are the mad machines of 1920s British illustrator W. Heath Robinson, and the Rabelaisian folk scenes of another Brit, Sir Stanley Spencer.

Essenhigh's images unfold her own internal mythologies and legends. They show figures caught frozen in dynamic moments of suspended animation. Abstracted hydras mutate into melting organic shapes, human figures are caught in exaggerated grotesque gestures, as they morph with mouths open, cavorting and yawning in the evening light.

Her earlier paintings in enamel were first celebrated for their flat surfaces, the detached perfection of virtual reality, and their sense of hyper-artificiality. But in her newer work, Essenhigh has progressed to deeper space, more eternal and more earthy themes. She switched from enamel to oil paint, and now she has added a new medium for her, monoprint. Her series of monoprints – along with new editions of intaglio prints – at Pace Prints Chelsea draw their subjects from nature, the seasons, mythology, and theater.

Inka, can you tell us about the genesis of the work you are current showing at Pace Prints? How you did you come to make this body of work?

It's an extension of what I've been working on with my paintings for the past couple of years. With the monotypes I would go in every day, sit down and make an image and it's very fast. All these things just come out of my head: I don't worry about their meaning. What I'm going for is an inner vision. or at least the *feeling* of an inner vision.

Can you explain what you mean by "inner vision"? Is it an internal world?

Yes, it's an internal world. But it's an internal world where I feel I'm tapping into everybody else's internal world.

The collective unconscious?

Exactly. When something feels sacred then I feel I'm on to something. I don't know what that looks like but that's the feeling I'm going for.

There are forty in the series, quite an expansive body of work. So, they're one-of-a-kind prints.

They are basically paintings on paper. I paint on a steel plate and then a sheet of paper gets pressed down on it picking up the image. The quickness and liquidness of painting on a smooth plate really works for me. I can make something small, substantial, and complete.

Right, it's a fast medium for you. There seem to be two dominant motifs in the series: the natural environment, seas or forests, and then corridors and stages.

Theater stages.

Exactly, theater stages. I sense a connection to paganism, the outdoor world, with forest gods or sea gods, different mythologies, anthropomorphism and archetypes. But can you say something about these stages, these corridors with what appear to be arms reaching out holding lights.

The stage is a metaphor for having arrived somewhere, or I suppose it's a place of consciousness in a public setting. And perhaps I'm not there yet but I'm on my way. I'm on a path to being able to articulate something or know something. And being backstage of something is like a metaphor for just that.

I think of Manhattan as being one big stage. It's kind of a small, compacted stage, as opposed to other cities where you drive around and you don't see it. You can actually walk around New York like a stage. You run into characters. You perform.

And there's a certain kind of lighting in the stage paintings that is reminiscent of the Bowery and that vaudevillian tradition, of Judy Garland or Ethel Merman. There's a quality to the light where the subject is bathed in, well, a very different kind of light to the lighting at the Oscars which is this all-consuming, every-wrinkle-visible light. This is much more of a golden, bathing type of light. Is that referencing something particular for you?



Inka Essenhigh, Path to the Stage, 2011. Aquatint and line etching with drypoint, 13-1/8 x 10-1/4 inches, Edition of 30. Published by Pace Editions, Inc.?

No, I just like it. In twilight things can emerge and disappear and can be ambiguous, and I sort of use that. I don't want to say as a crutch, because god, I feel that, for so long now, I've pursued taking art out of my art.

Taking out all of your tropes.

Right. I'm attracted to twilight in terms of making things appear and disappear and flatten things out and bring things to shape in an easy light.

... in a mythological sense, the magic of twilight.

It's not like Manhattan where you get sunny days, you get rainy days, you get twilight, you get all sorts of things. I just set it all to twilight.

You prefer twilight because there's more of a blend going on?

Or more ambiguity.

Not so claustrophobic, not so oppressive?

Right. I was making one that had light in it and I thought, Oh god! (laughs) I hate making light and shadow. There's something so oppressive about that formula. You've got to have a light source but then the next thing you have to do is to make it somewhat logical. It's so oppressive, I can't stand it.

In your earlier work there were certain kinds of figures that make me think of institutional settings with uniforms – jackets with particular kinds of buttons being used. In these later works, the clothes are more like shrouds and rags, something more decaying...

When I was making the earlier work I think that I was very consciously trying to make something contemporary, taking a color sense and a design that is from today. But these new ones are not attempting to be contemporary at all costs. These are inspired, if anything, by timelessness. So I just don't have those ideas any more. I mean, they just don't come to me. I don't sit there and think "How can I make this contemporary?" which is what I would have done before and it's very easy, you know, you can see something you just saw, like uniforms or things like hazardous waste, "Haz.Mat" suits and things like that. They just look like they don't come from any other time, because those materials didn't exist before.

Do you see the clothing now as shrouds sometimes?

Not so much. No, it's just a feeling. No I don't necessarily see them as shrouds. I see them as amorphous, unformed energy.

Contemporary references in that earlier series bring one right into the now. But these newer works are more eternal. I'm seeing Father Christmas in one of the works, for instance.

Yes. Often it's about representation of energy forms on an elemental level.

And I was thinking in terms of the cycle of images that you have at Pace Prints right now, they seem to be seasonal, maybe we could talk about how that works in the show. Are they arranged in a particular sequence?

The Pace people arranged it, but what you see is Spring, Fall, and Winter. I wasn't there during the summer so I don't have any Summer prints but yes, when I was on my way there and I was wondering what am I going to do this morning images that come to mind are part of where I am at.

So there is a diarist quality to them?

Yes there is a diarist quality.

So there's a seasonal flavor. The stage ones, are they more Fall/twilight?

Yeah, Fall and Winter.

I always feel that asking an artist like you to specify what you're doing in your work spoils the elusiveness of your work. There's a quality of "Does this mean this?" That said, do you feel like you're heading more into abstraction or you're coming more into figuration as you progress?

I think I'm probably heading more into figuration. But figuration isn't necessarily that something means one thing or another. When I come out with an image of something, you could say that it's a stage, and I want it to be a stage, but whether I put one person there or two people there is based on feeling, it's basically that I'm still working on an abstract level. I mean there is abstraction in all figuration and figuration in abstraction. I have a rule that if you can name it, it's not abstract. "What is it?" (laughs).



Inka Essenhigh, *Sleeping Faun*, 2010. Oil paint monotype printed from a steel matrix, 11-3/4 x 13-3/4 inches.
Published by Pace Editions, Inc.?

I really think with painting you can tell what people are thinking and feeling for each thing. So if you are making work where you are totally not into it, you can see it. Maybe you can see that in sculpture too. I can't read it as well because I'm not a sculptor. But with painting you need to be clear. "Oh, here I felt like I needed to do something. Here I needed to make this look more like this." And any time you start to go and make art where you have a certain set of rules, like "I can't be too much this way and I can't be too much that way, and I'm only going to go here and not so far because it gets too cheesy or this way because that's no good, too figurative, too literal," all these criticisms, you're not really making art. If all you're doing is negotiating these rules, that's not art, that's sort of like you're patching together various things. But when you're onto something for real, all those rules fly out the window, when you want to do something.

And when you really have something to say. But how does that relate for example to your shift into a deeper, three-dimensional space?

Because I could feel more and more that in the flatter work, “You can’t be too much this way, you can’t be too much that way”, and I started to want to expand but I couldn’t figure out how. “You can’t put a face in, you can’t make it too illustrative. You can’t.”

It’s more limited, you’d be stuck with your facility to draw and paint, which is phenomenal but you’d be stuck in the role of “She’s the one who does these incredible line drawings” but whereas you needed to expand your range.

Right, to be a real human being, not just somebody who is afraid to be this, and afraid to be that.

You’re taking on a more canonical type of painting in some sense.

Well I think I always loved that kind of canonical painting, I always did. That is what I really love. I love older work more than I like most contemporary artwork, and I also understand that what the contemporary art world is actually trafficking in is *contemporary* art. It’s got to be current on some level. I don’t know what to say beyond saying that I want that and I feel happy and easy and right making these paintings. And I trust the ease of it. The inspiration of it. The rightness of it.

... in that it’s not a contrived position?

Yeah. I was a young person trying to be a part of things but that’s not my main focus any more.

**Inka Essenhigh will appear in conversation with Alexi Worth at the New York Studio School on Tuesday, March 29 at 6.30 pm.
8 West 8 Street, between 5th and 6th avenues, New York City, 212 673 6466**



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