

ROCHELLE LEVY: FIGURES ON THE BEACH

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(From the catalog)

The motif of the figure on the beach has a long and complex history in modern art. It appears at the very beginning of modernism, in the late eighteenth century, in Benjamin West's *Chryses, the Priest of Apollo, on the Seashore, Invoking His God to Avenge the Injuries Done Him by Agamemnon*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1773. a painting whose very title evokes the rather lugubrious tenets of Neoclassical stoicism. Caspar David Friedrich's mystical *Monk by the Sea* of 1809 embodies Romanticism's musings on the relationship of man and nature; Friedrich's figure, seen from the back contemplating the vastness of the ocean, conveys a sense of cosmic isolation.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the beach had become not simply the backdrop for appropriate history paintings or the vivid symbol of man's powerlessness against nature but also the scene of middle-class entertainment. William Powell Frith's *Ramsgate Sands* of 1854 shows an entire panorama with the wealth of anecdotal detail found in a Victorian novel. Over one hundred figures, none of them in bathing costumes, populate the beach—walking, talking, reading, sheltering themselves from the sun with umbrellas. In the foreground a mother raises the long skirts on her little girl so that she can dip her feet in the water. From the child's look of wide-eyed astonishment. we can surmise that it is extremely cold.

Across the channel, in France, Eugène Boudin made numerous paintings of the beach during the 1860s. Most often small in scale and of long rectangular format, Boudin's paintings capture fashionable life on the beach at Trouville, Deauville, or Honfleur. With deft, rapid brushstrokes and a palette of beige, light blue, and white for sand, sea, and sky, accented by the black and bright colors of the clothing worn by his promenaders, he created a series of paintings whose explorations of light and color were an inspiration to his pupil Claude Monet.

This theme continued to flourish throughout the nineteenth century. One thinks, for example, of Homer's watchers on the coast of Maine or, in the twentieth century, of Picasso's anthropomorphic creatures gamboling on the sands. More recently, Roy Lichtenstein, Willem de Kooning, and Eric Fischl have dealt with this subject.*

Rochelle Levy's paintings build upon this tradition to create a perceptive variation upon a theme. A lone figure may make us reflect on the vastness of the ocean, as Friedrich's monk does, or varieties of observation may suggest the narrative detail of a Frith. Levy's placement of color and figure may evoke Boudin, but her beach paintings make a unique statement.

The power and originality of the paintings lie in the sense of tension they create. They provide a penetrating exploration of the social interaction of the beach, but they do so with a detachment that objectifies personal observation. The paintings portray a seemingly limitless landscape populated with figures, yet the horizontal sections of the composition and the touches of pure, flat color assert the two-dimensionality of the canvas. The figures become imbedded in the flattened bands of sand and sea. Even the angles formed by the placement of the figures against the horizontals of the landscape or the touch of red against blue-green generate friction.

Levy began painting this series in 1970 at the beach in Margate, New Jersey. It follows her earlier examination of horses and horse racing, which was seen at a solo exhibition in 1983 at the Art Alliance in Philadelphia. As in those pictures, she explores many facets of her subject. In the best tradition of plein air painting, the compositions begin as quick thumbnail studies made at the site. Working in a variety of mediums, she studies all aspects of her subject-color relationships, spatial relationships, and relationships among the populace of her canvas. Colored pencil studies capture the subtle variations in the horizontal striations of sea and sky. The pale orange and violet of sunrise move gently across the page, the boundary of the horizon maintained by the color melded into parallel harmonies.

A series of watercolor studies observes the poses of individual bathers. Working with a very wet brush, the colors are applied quickly, capturing character not through facial detail but through pose and gesture. Perhaps not surprisingly, the figures in the studies and the finished works almost always have their backs to us. They, like the painter, continually turn their attention to the sea. With a keenness of observation and a sure hand, Levy nevertheless reveals in backs the expressiveness and individuality we would normally discern in faces.

Even in a rapid watercolor study we see Levy's wry observation of the characters around her. In *Watercolor Sketch No. 1* two women, standing at the right edge of the page, form a comical contrast. Their bent elbows echo each other, but their shapes and costumes, even their stance—one stolid, one rakish—set them apart. The thinner, more active figure to the left tilts her head, and although we see only the back of it, we clearly follow her gaze toward two men reclining near the top of the page. This link among the three figures is underscored subtly by a careful orchestration of form and color. Like her they wear white bathing suits. Like her their skin is painted with touches of hot pink and marigold yellow. The sun shimmers against their skin, making the edges of their lithe bodies indistinct. Her companion, dressed in blue, with a misshapen squashed hat to match, plants her feet firmly and looks out to the sea.

Other watercolor sketches, such as *Sketch No. 2*, record varieties of movement, or in the case of *Sketch No. 3*, they place the figures within the context of the beach. In these studies not only the figures' relationships to one another but to the ocean, the sand, and the sky are shown. Quick oil studies executed at the seashore also record color and compositional relationships. Often bits of sand adhere to them, a testament to the location of the artist's studio. In *The Four Umbrellas* (uncropped study) (fig. 4), a small piece of canvas is used to fix the horizontal bands of the landscape, against which the large umbrellas stuck into the sand form jaunty angles. In this study the paint is uncharacteristically thick and unmodulated, as if all that mattered was the capturing of essential form.

More detailed oil sketches for the canvases, executed later in the studio, also exist. Small unstretched rectangles, they appear like picture postcards curled from exposure to sun and water. In the study for *September Splendor*, Levy repeats the horizontal color bands of the previous oil study, but here the areas of light and dark blue are broken up by touches of white—the uneven foam of the breakers and the thin wisps of clouds moving across the sky. Asymmetrically placed groups of swimmers, waders, and sunbathers also dot the landscape, adding touches of brilliant contrasting color.

The finished painting, *September Splendor*, sharpens the composition. Clouds in the top of the sky become well defined against its blue surface, appearing like long, low, white ruffled triangles that trail off into bluish white lines. Echoing but reversing these forms, the surf crashes on the shore. The irregularity and expanse of nature is held in check by these figures. Some face the water, some stand and lie on an exact parallel line to sea and sky, their bodies repeating an abstract outline that recalls Seurat's *Bathing at Asnières*.

In *September Magic*, the composition is transformed by the device of altering the long rectangle of the sketch to a perfect square. The sky, which becomes pure unmodulated color at the top, dwarfs the figures below. Again the surf, this time a single line of foam, repeats the shape of the

clouds, expressing the unity of nature. This feeling of awe, of man's isolation, is also stressed by the change in the proportion of sand and sea. In the sketch they are of equal size, but in the finished painting the sand becomes a narrow band; the figures, now all in red with their heads turned away from us, almost seem to be pushed into the limitless water.

The various paintings are largely codified into a single composition, a frontal view of the landscape that reveals the band of beach, the ocean, and the sky. These are repeated with a subtle change in spatial and color relationships. Changes in light, in temperature, in the air are reflected in the palette used and in the quality of light. Such paintings as *Frederica's Day* fit a wealth of color and detail into a small space, three or four touches of paint describing one of the dozens of figures who crowd the beach. These paintings, with their quick rapid brush strokes, express the fun and gaiety of the seashore, the sense of complete abandon.

The basic pattern of beach, people, ocean, and sky is repeated in *Ladies in White*, but the color relationships are completely altered. The boundary between sea and sky becomes obscured, and all of nature assumes a grayish purple cast. Undaunted by the lively waves, people throng to the beach, their dark, emerald green beach chairs creating a staccato rhythm as we see them open, with their square backs toward us, or carried in the hands of arriving sunbathers. A detailed look at the figures reveals Levy's sureness of hand. Individuals are described with a few strokes of the brush. It is in the details as well that we see the richness of her color—the pure emerald green, blue, gray, and purple shadows cast by the bathers or by their brightly colored umbrellas. *The Lifeguard Stand*, a small oil sketch, repeats similar overall tonalities of color. Again, in the details we can appreciate Levy's technique. The entire canvas is very thinly painted, but subtle gradations of color touched with thickly applied pure white brilliantly capture the effect of the waves as they move in toward the shore.

Reminiscent of watercolors by the nineteenth-century English painter David Cox, the large painting *Deserted Beach* shows a deserted beach. It becomes a picture about color, light, and movement. The beach and the sea are viewed this time from an oblique angle. The diagonals of sand, sea, and clouds, seen in counterpoint to one another, are united by the thin washes of oil paint whose colors move from gray to mauve to brilliant blue and white, each section of color partaking of the others.

Uncharacteristically, we are plunged into the sea in *Summer Haze*. There is no beach. The breakers, painted with thick impasto, form an undulating horizontal line at the bottom of the canvas, broken only by the colored vertical accents of those who run into the waves. Except for this narrow band, this painting too becomes an essay in color modulation and effects of light. The dark gray sea, deep blue at the horizon, is balanced by the thinly painted blue sky. Where they meet, a glow of pale peach light radiates on either side.

Rochelle Levy's Margate series is a marvelous body of work. It can be approached in many different ways—as a delightful evocation of life on the beach or as a humorous comment on the interactions of our fellow human beings when they are not self-conscious. But beyond this, we can enjoy these works as sure placement of form and touches of color. They also refer to another of the great traditions of modern art—the capturing of light, of time always in flux. Motivated by Turner and Monet, her acknowledged inspirations, Levy has chosen to paint the shifting color relationships of sea and sky. Taken as a whole, the paintings become not only a deft perception of life at the beach and a capturing of the tensions of abstract form, but an embodiment of the passage of time.

