

Janaki Lennie and Mona Marshall: *Line of Sight*

Women & Their Work

Rebecca S. Cohen

Janaki Lennie, Future Conditional 42203, 2003
Graphite on paper
30x22 inches

You know it's true. No matter how well-intentioned the friend who sets you up, blind dates are usually a recipe for disaster. Best case scenario, you waste an evening that would've been better spent at home with a good book. Recently, however, the folks at Women & Their Work proved that when it comes to pairing artists who are strangers, a successful marriage of the minds can in fact result. The gallery's exhibition of works by Janaki Lennie, currently of Houston (and formerly the Reviews Editor for this publication), and Austin's Mona Marshall suggests that these artists have been talking to each other about issues of place, space and the human condition for a very long time. In actuality, the two have only recently been introduced. While the works are installed as independent yet simultaneous exhibits, a whispered dialogue permeates the galleries.

To my surprise, W&TW presented Lennie's spare graphite on paper and graphite on gesso board drawings. I was expecting her signature paintings on canvas—lovely pastel-hued skiescapes that graze the tops of buildings and trees and reveal the hazy atmosphere beyond. Instead, the walls were filled with black and white works of varying scale, each with only a few human figures or small, iconic trees set against vast, satiny-white backdrops. Lennie's figures appear neither stranded in snowy fields nor lost in a desert landscape. They stride with determination or stand firmly in place with equal resolve. They are miniscule within the picture plane—a fraction of an inch high

in some cases. And yet, there are unmistakable details—the swing of an individual arm or leg indicating that these figures are not necessarily marching lockstep or even headed in the same direction. These are definitely independent men on the move or, in some cases, standing pensive and still. The viewer suspends disbelief and enters their strangely barren world, either filling in the blanks or accepting the vast void of the environment and its implications. Sometimes opposing groups of figures are divided by a simple line, an elegant metaphor perhaps, or merely a minimalist tool to organize space. In the compositions where similarly positioned trees are substituted for human figures, the absence of urban clutter is intensified. (If one of those trees fell, would there be any noise?)

Mona Marshall's black and white, architectural encaustic paintings on prepared paper consist of white, gray and black brush strokes that thickly coat the entire picture plane with nervous lines scratched into the surface. The first impression of an intersection between Lennie and Marshall's bodies of work is one of a typically ill-matched blind date: willowy ascetic meets zaftig, gum-chewing spitfire. But wait—there are commonalities. Marshall creates urban environments as apt to intimidate and swallow us up as the vast stretches of white in Lennie's landscapes. Marshall's large, textured drawings are as chaotic at first glance as Lennie's are serene. But, when one settles into them it becomes clear that this artist, too, is presenting isolated figures set within vast—albeit more detailed—dreamscapes. Marshall invites the viewer to project his or her own narrative against the thrusting walls and surfaces. I imagine the aftermath of an earthquake, a postapocalyptic view of city life, grim and unsettling in the manner of South African artist William Kentridge. Marshall's technique suggests the same jittery movement as Kentridge's videos, and her figures seem caught in a similarly dour story line.

The figures in Marshall's works are the city cousins to Lennie's wide-open country kin. Or, perhaps, Marshall's pictures represent uniquely American clutter in contrast to Lennie's more austere Australian aesthetic (the artist has been a resident of the USA only since 1994). In any event, Marshall places us closer to the figure than Lennie. Her subjects are no longer striding across the landscape but are very still, waiting and contemplating their next move. She offers more visual information to draw on—we are aware of costume and gender. We stand closer but still navigate on instinct, trying to make sense of the topsy-turvy experience she offers. Marshall's works are all titled *Point of Entry*, with no confirmation of where the journey leads. Lennie titles her work *Future Conditional*, and we travel across vaguely unfamiliar territory with a feeling of apprehension about our destination. What



Mona Marshall, *Point of Entry, The Directors' Room*,
Encaustic on paper
85x52 inches



Mona Marshall, *Point of Entry, The Station*,
Encaustic on paper
73x116 inches

is certain is that we have been eavesdropping on a conversation between two strangers who have a great deal to talk about on their first "date." Good for us.

Rebecca S. Cohen is a freelance writer living in Austin. She recently completed a guidebook to Texas museums which will be published later this year by the University of Texas Press.