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Seven strange and compelling new paintings by Amy Bessone consider the nude female model, but not in the conventional sense of that term. As much as they might be living, breathing persons posing in an artist's studio, her female models are also established, culturally revered representations of women painted (and sculpted) since the Renaissance.

When Bessone paints "Beautiful Sisters," an imposing pair of 8-foot Amazons, you see Picasso's primal "Two Nudes," perhaps his 1929-30 painted-iron sculpture "Head of a Woman," E.L. Kirchner's Berlin streetwalkers, even Botticelli's ethereal "Birth of Venus" effortlessly embedded in the figures' flat, linear forms. When she paints "Ms. Mash," a lush, violet-verging-on-magenta 6-footer seated on the floor with one knee raised and the other tucked beneath her, Matisse's "Pink Nude," Ingres' "Grand Odalisque" and other so-called "oriental" harem girls are there too.



For her second show at David Kordansky, Bessone fills the gallery with these large, jewel-colored canvases, plus eight small studies on paper. The ground of each canvas is thinly painted or deeply stained, in mostly secondary and tertiary colors -- peachy orange, purplish brown, chrome yellow, turquoise-blue and turquoise-green. The colors bleed.

The monumental women are uniformly drawn with black paint, often surrounded by black clouds and puddles. (A gallery handout likens the technique to *hitsuzendo*, a modern form of Japanese ink painting in which the whole body, rather than just the wrist or arm, contributes to the movement of the brush.) Edvard Munch, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Willem De Kooning, Markus Lupertz -- the historical references pile up, with multiple examples in each picture.



And did I mention that a lively cartoon quality also thrums through the thick black linearity of her figures?

Like Lisa Yuskavage and Cecily Brown -- albeit in stylistic terms as sharply different from theirs as theirs are from each other -- Bessone gathers together canonical female images primarily produced by men. She takes charge and does with them what she will, tossing them into her painterly Mixmaster. They get blended, layered, fused, pushed and pulled, becoming new, hybrid figures at once grotesque and cheerful, deformed yet oddly carefree.

Their multivalent, even contradictory sources arise slowly into a viewer's consciousness, like ghosts of paintings past, slipping into the room. But my favorite feature of Bessone's distinctive work is the visual speed of her painterly line, which conflicts with the slow deliberation of these inescapable, layered references. The contradiction makes for marvelously taut surfaces. Dynamic action dismantles any sense of objectified passivity -- the usual condition of a female nude when painted by a male artist.