ARTFORUM

Review: Greg Ito
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View of "Greg Ito," 2016.

Behind an arch made from a plywood room divider whose patterned incisions gave the effect of palm fronds, candles flickered in a purple haze created by the tinted tubing that lined the rim of the pink gallery walls cradling Greg Ito's "Soothsayer." The screens prepared one to see the exhibition as a rebus. They evoked the folding screens of a psychic's reading room and made a sculptural pun on the mystical art of "palm" reading. With a sleight of slender white hands and decorative élan, this glamorous installation, grounded by three handsome paintings, made fashion of fate. Out to Sea (all works 2016) presented a pair of hands tenderly entwined before a rectangular lavender background that floats near the top of the six-by-four-and-a-half-foot taupe canvas (dimensions shared with the other paintings on view). In Home Sweet Home, two hands rose up from a scarlet block gracing the top of a brown canvas, offering a benediction laced with warning. In the final canvas, Kiss the Sky, two right hands extended to touch each other, perhaps for the first time, in a field of powder blue set against a beige background. Lingering in the luxury of touching and being touched, these strange hands conjured the impossible grace of Disney femininity—the elongated fingers of Cinderella or Maleficent, delineated in graphic black. More classically, they invoked Botticelli's trio of Graces robed in white, or possibly the Fates: one to spin, one to measure, and one to cut the threads of mortal life.

These three sets of hands held court over their respective compositions, and over the room itself. Smaller icons—smoking candles; planes, houses, and ships aflame; an hourglass running through its supply of sand—appear judiciously placed in the works' bottom corners, while the paintings' middle sections remain empty. One imagined that two catastrophic scenes and ominous omens depicted prophecies foretold. Yet rendered in miniaturized, paint-by-numbers color blocking, the lower images became cathartic metaphors rather than melodramas. The comparatively minuscule insets suggested tarot cards placed on a table, making the variously brown canvases at once windows onto tragedy and obdurate surfaces for divination.

Crucially, the paintings were integrated into a cohesive ensemble involving decorative objects, dramatic lighting, and quixotically colored walls that recalled the unified interiors of Art Nouveau. The patterns and hues of the room harmonized with the paintings' depictions. In one corner of the gallery and backed by another frond-patterned screen, a table whose red and blue legs suggested both candlestick curvatures and outlines of faces in profile held actual white-and-black striped candlesticks whose silhouettes echoed this motif—a familiar device used to demonstrate the confusion of figure and ground. (The scheme also made an appearance in the candlestick depicted in Out to Sea, whose candle emits a thick plume of inky smoke.)

The gallery's fluorescent-lit walls cumulatively mimicked the sky at twilight, effectively holding the room in a perpetual suspension. Like the moment before a fortune is revealed—or perhaps like the instant before we see our fate realized—this was a static temporality. One was tempted to take refuge in the space, to relax into its soothing ambiance. By indulging in the tropes of the decorative, "Soothsayer" powerfully aligned the cycle of fashionable trends with the wheel of fortune. Distracted by the constant churning of the cool, we lose track of the one thing we can't reset—the time we have left.