

Valérie Favre, Art in America, Nov. 12. 2009

*by michael duncan*

**NÎMES** On View at the MUSEUM OF ART, LUCERNE, Through Feb. 7, 2010

Paul McCarthy and Nayland Blake have used rabbits as male alter-egos, playing on an idea of the creatures as randy and guileless. For Valérie Favre, rabbits are decidedly female surrogates. Playboy bunnies on the loose, they strum guitars, dance in swimsuits, play leapfrog, ride a Harley, wield an artist's brush. Rendered in densely hued daubs, smears and exuberant strokes, the long-legged characters in her "Lapine" series (slyly punning on the French slang for penis, "la pine") are spry action figures that celebrate the artist's own chutzpah as a spirited woman painter. Focusing primarily on works from the past six years, the exhibition presented Favre's off-kilter narratives and insistent stylistic experimentation as a celebration of the still open-ended possibilities of her medium.

In this survey of more than 70 works, Favre showed that she has taken on the big boys of European painting. Her energetic brushwork and bold foregrounding of figures recall similar dramatic effects in paintings by Baselitz and Lüpertz. Her comic sensibility, elliptical imagery and dramatic flair have been compared, respectively, with Martin Kippenberger, Luc Tuymans and Marlene Dumas. I would argue she is easily their equal, or better, in her emotional range and the sophistication with which she handles paint. Favre worked for some years in the film business, both as a stage designer and actress, and a cinematic sensibility permeates her visual work. The 24 small oil paintings of the series "Autos in the Night" (2002-03), which lined the walls of a single gallery, were closely hung to obliquely suggest a storyboard. Grim allegories with blurred details,

the works feature motionless cars, Ensor-like skeletons and a recurring Peugeot lion logo.

Favre's romantic impulses are fully unleashed in the Black Forest settings and melancholic fairy-tale narratives of the series "The Third Brother Grimm" (2004-07). A related work, *Peter Pan* (2007), depicts a reclining faun playing panpipes on a hillside under a moody night sky. Beyond is the glimmering grid of Los Angeles. In the similar setting of *Mulholland Drive* (2007), a centaur gazes out over the hazy lights of the city, posing next to a tall stately plane tree straight out of Böcklin.

"Balls and Tunnels" (1995-2008) is a series of seven abstractions—imposing, splashy works executed in transparent acrylic varnish on a cotton nettle support dyed variously. They are detonations of luscious color à la Sam Francis. A group of recent large-scale narrative paintings, however, is more introspective and psychological. The approximately 5-by-12-foot oil *Secret Service for the Queen* (2008) presents a gray tableau of long-legged majorettes attending a dunce-capped corpse on a gurney. On her torso is a forlorn owl with a face that could have come from a Munch painting. This portentous, gothic scene typifies a tough, haunting strain in Favre's work.

*Photo: Valerie Favre: Secret Service for the Queen, 2008, oil on canvas, 67 by 149 1/2 inches; at Carre d'Art--Musée d'Art Contemporain de Nîmes.*