

Michael Stevenson at Angel's Gate Cultural Center

There is one line in Michael Stevenson's *Belle Epoque* series that says it all. This single serpentine line concisely

draws the connection to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, upon whose oeuvre this current work is founded. Stevenson began *Belle Epoque* as an exploration of the formal elements in Ingres's portraits of nineteenth-century society women, but soon came to admire the liberty that Ingres took with anatomy, famously adding vertebrae to his rendering of *La Grande*

*Odalisque* in 1814, among other mannerist conceits. While these anatomical absurdities were scorned by critics, the license that Ingres took in creating *La Grande Odalisque's* remarkably sensual (albeit impossible) pose would prefigure the work of Matisse and Picasso.

Stevenson pushes the element of abstraction in his paintings even further by integrating vivid colors and geometry reminiscent of Hans Hofmann into the figurative portraits.

Right angles and horizontal bands of color lock the women of Stevenson's series into the two-dimensional plane of canvas. In the three-piece cycle *Vicomtesse*, the sitters' respective gazes are obscured by blocks of color fixed over their eyes like blindfolds. Here, Stevenson's decidedly first-wave feminist response to the women on view in Ingres's paintings is as opaque as the bands of color themselves. This visual critique fails to take into account more recent readings of Ingres's representations of women as subjects capable of representing their own sensuality. Despite the argument that women only looked upon themselves in order to gauge their reception as objects of the male gaze, there is evidence that women

did, in fact, commission and collect Ingres's sensual paintings for themselves. Seen in this light, the obscured gaze of the women pictured in the *Vicomtesse* series and the blank visages of the women depicted in the multi-panel painting *Quatre Robes* are overwhelmingly pedantic techniques used to express the perceived objectivity of Ingres's sitters.

In this vein, the portrait *Vicomtesse* leaves the most room for interpretation. The subject guards her identity and agency that is unmistakably stripped from other paintings in the suite. The vicomtesse's heavy-lidded stare is still visible through a semi-transparent rectangle of bronze that covers her from the bridge of the nose upwards. The curve of her neck and slender shoulders (home of that unmistakable line) push toward the viewer, but the bow of her closed lips and far-off gaze indicate the distance of her

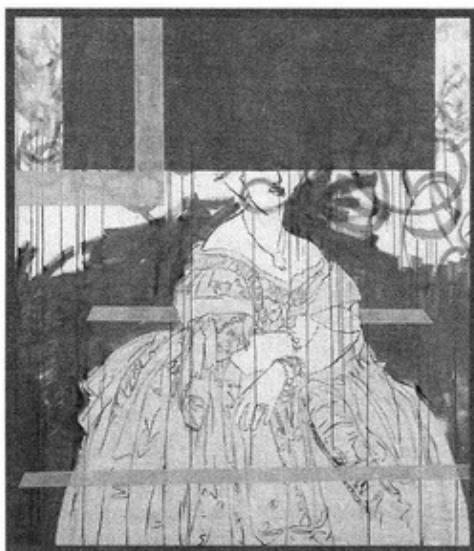
thoughts. Here, the use of vibrant color (for which Ingres was berated) heightens the contrast of the sitter's white skin against the vivid gold of her ornately patterned dress.

Stevenson takes another giant leap away from Ingres's figurative portraits with two abstract works, *Belle Epoque I* and *Belle Epoque II*. In these canvases of studied geometry, Stevenson's history as a print-

maker comes to the fore as he pays close attention to the layers of paint and their almost sculptural interaction.

The artist's adroit exploration of Ingres's sensual lines coupled with his echoing of this energy in the swirling backgrounds and boldly sketched representations of exotic fabrics and hairstyles presents a wealth to admire in the *Belle Epoque* series.

—Kim Beil



Michael Stevenson, *Vicomtesse*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, at Angel's Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro.

Michael Stevenson: *Belle Epoque* closed in September at Angel's Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro.

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