

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## How to Kiss the Sky: Kyle Staver's Recent Paintings

by John Yau, October 27, 2013

You don't see Kyle Staver's dark, moonlit domains so much as become their invisible and unacknowledged witness and ally. In an age riddled with cynicism and laced with irony, she envisions a shameless alternative in which mythological figures, such as Daphne, Andromeda, Syrinx, Perseus, and a satyr, are at home.

Her current exhibition, *Kyle Staver: Recent Paintings*, at Tibor de Nagy (October 17–November 23, 2013), which is comprised of four paintings, all nearly six feet high and a little more than four feet wide. In "Daphne" (2013) and "Syrinx" (2013), the darkest paintings, the figures are pressed closer to the picture plane than in "Andromeda" (2013) and "Groupers" (2013), which take place in a nighttime sky and ocean.



Kyle Staver, *Syrinx*, 2013, oil on canvas, 68 x 52 inches, Courtesy Tibor de Nagy New York

As Charles Baudelaire remarked in "The Painter of Modern Life," "Genius is no more than childhood recovered at will," but with an "analytical mind [...] to bring order into the sum of experience." Staver's genius is her ability to envision a mythological world from a child's point of view, which is to say the vision of someone who believes that these figures exist as flesh, fur, feathers and blood, rather than as symbols or allegorical representations. She further amplifies this belief by depicting all the scenes *in media res*.

Even when we know the outcome of the myth, Staver calmly focuses on a transitional moment — as in Daphne's violent transformation and Andromeda's perilous fall from the sky. The firm but delicate traces of glowing moonlight on the bodies, trees and clouds infuse the paintings with an otherworldliness that shares something with Giorgio de Chirico's use of shadows. The difference, though, is straightforward: from the work alone, I get the feeling that Staver is warmhearted and has a sense of humor, which are characteristics I would never assign to de Chirico.

In "Andromeda," we are aloft in the cool night sky, hovering slightly above Andromeda, as Perseus, astride a winged horse, reaches down and rescues her from plunging to certain death. If, as the painting conveys, we have defied gravity and are high up in the moonlit air, near some clouds, then we too must be part of this world, which must therefore exist. At the same time, Staver underscores the otherworldliness of this realm by revealing it as a place bathed only in cold white moonlight. Even when the action takes place on the earth, with the only illumination provided by the moon, we feel as if we

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Kyle Staver, *Andromeda*, 2013, oil on canvas, 68 x 52 inches, Courtesy Tibor de Nagy, New York

are both in the painting and not in it – that we can reach out and touch a world that, at the same time, seems dreamlike and remote.

Formally, there is a tension between the figures and the space they inhabit, which infuses these paintings with metaphysical edge. In “Daphne” (2013), Staver depicts the moment when the nymph Daphne, tired of running from Apollo, who is desperately in love with her, is changed into a tree by her father, Peneus, a river god. Daphne’s legs have taken root while her hands and arms grow into long and slender branches, with her right hand (on the painting’s left side) topped by laurel leaves. A wolf-like creature in the lower right-hand corner bares his teeth

Staver’s posing of Daphne near the canvas’s top edge makes the painting’s bounded surface feel cramped, yet the placement, which sets her before a dark blue sky barely lit by an invisible moon, hints at the limitlessness of the universe. This is where Staver differs from her predecessors, going back to the wonderfully mysterious Piero di Cosimo and his “A Satyr mourning over a Nymph” (ca. 1495) and continuing up to more recent artists, such as Paul Georges (1923–2002) and Milet Andrejevic (1925–89). All of these earlier artists worked within the Renaissance pictorial convention of a shallow stage space with a landscape background, ranging from idealized to modern. Their figures fit comfortably into the pictorial space their artist-authors made for them.

Staver does something different and more contemporary in feeling. Clearly, she has absorbed many lessons from abstract painting. Daphne’s outstretched arms span nearly the painting’s entire length as her body twists toward the sky, while the nipple of her left, upthrust breast stops just short of the middle of the painting’s top edge. With her torso arched back, her upward turned face seems about to kiss the painting’s top edge, as if it were a physical barrier in her way.

And yet this feeling of being hemmed in by the painting’s physical parameters is contradicted by Daphne’s new identity as a laurel tree, a living and growing thing. She wants to break through the barriers and she eventually will. At the same time, her palpable physical presence underscores the empty night sky’s limitlessness beyond her. It seems to me that in “Daphne,” Staver not only acknowledges that we are bounded beings that exist in an infinite universe, but accepts this unknowable state as both a challenge and an inspiration.

In this regard, Staver’s “Daphne” can be read as an examination of painting’s contested status, as surface and space. If you think about it, she is the artist’s alter ego and ours. The other way we might usefully read Staver’s Daphne is as a refusal to accommodate oneself to the critical discourse, especially as it is espoused by a rather powerful contingent of the art world that largely considers paintings a thing of the past. Daphne, a figure from the past who carries new meanings into the present, is a fitting emblem for the desire for freedom and the price you might have to pay to gain it. In the end, amid all these worldly pressures, Staver does not ignore the existence of the sky.