

# Jennifer Steinkamp

LEHMANN MAUPIN GALLERY

In language so pithy as to be axiomatic, Ed Ruscha suggested in a 1979 drawing that HOLLYWOOD IS A VERB. Something similar is communicated by Los Angeles-based artist Jennifer Steinkamp, a onetime commercial animator (of ads for candy and cockroach spray, among other things), whose works in digital video employ special effects to excess. Utilizing abstract geometries that rival those of M. C. Escher, as well as representational elements like waves, trees, and garlands of flowers, which she stylizes to the point of uncanny hyperreality, Steinkamp through her immersive environments dematerializes galleries' architecture into undulating fields of color. This spectacular use of technology has meant that Steinkamp's work tends to get framed in relation to her presumed genuflection to the entertainment industry and read through the suspect terms of beauty. Indeed, the two words that appear most often in the literature on the artist (regularly in anxious proximity) are *ravishing* and *vapid*.

But Steinkamp's new projects, a selection of which were on view recently at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, seem to propose that surface is the point, and that a focus on it needn't represent a throwback. (Critics have also compared her unfavorably to California Finish Fetish precursors, a connection that nonetheless gets at what is worth attending to in her work. This position is opposed to, say, the view aired by Doug Harvey that she is a producer of "digital updatings of Haight-Ashbury lightshow aesthetics," and to Peter Frank's assertion that she manufactures high-tech "lava lamp[s].") Gliding across the walls, *The Wreck of the Dumaru F*, 2004, a computer-animated digital projection, is downright disorienting, surrounding viewers on all sides and reaching from floor to ceiling. Representing an ocean of sickly red-yellow—the colors are swirled together, taffy-style—the water writhes, rises, swells, and crashes below a virtual sky (actually the sea as it might appear from a different vantage point) of equally impossible crystal blue. Yet its awesome superficiality also admits of a kind of "depth," displaced onto a brief vinyl wall text. From this we learn the missing narrative, which transpired during World War I: At the age of nineteen, Steinkamp's great-uncle was on a ship that was struck near Guam; after thirteen days on a lifeboat that lacked sufficient provisions he suffered hallucinations and then died.

Foiling the baroque landscape and involved back story of *The Wreck of the Dumaru F*, a new series, "Formation," 2006–, which features six projections of falling sheets, filled the rear gallery. Despite making use of all available vertical space (as does *The Wreck of the Dumaru F*), the work achieves a cool restraint. At Lehmann Maupin, each projection occupied a floor-to-ceiling area of wall, within the boundaries of which linens crumpled and tumbled down, in perfect, if illusory, response to gravity. They glide over the interior's surfaces but also, falsely, imply

its irregularity (the sheets sometimes look as though they're being snagged on uneven planes or blown by an unseen wind). They have different patterns—stripes in *Formation I*, circles in *Formation F*, circles and stripes in *Formation B*—but they are all, though I hate to say it, ravishing. (So much so, actually, that one woman in the gallery contended that Steinkamp should merchandise the designs to home décor retailers.) Steinkamp has given us the perfect take on the mythic "dream factory," all gloss and no depth, with decoration unapologetically unmoored from narrative. Her projections are not so much whizzbang as languidly hypnotic, and the effect of viewing them—appropriately enough, given their "subject"—is not unlike that of counting sheep. In the end, the installation works, and it does so irrespective of its technowizardry, finally exercised unabashedly, and, one surmises, for its own sake.

—Suzanne Hudson

Jennifer Steinkamp, *The Wreck of the Dumaru F* (detail), 2004, video installation, dimensions variable.

