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RE-COLOR YOUR WORLD WITH LISA RUYTER'S SPINS ON 'FAMOUS MEN'

Lisa Ruyter: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

Eleven Rivington, through July 3

By Jessica Dawson



Let us now praise nine anonymous ladies: Lisa Ruyter's *Edwin Rosskam: Washington, D.C. Canning conducted by the Mother's Club Southwest Washington* (2015). Courtesy Eleven Rivington

Let us not praise famous men, shall we? Fine, sure: We won't. And Lisa Ruyter won't either, even if her latest exhibition appears to threaten to do just that. Rest assured, the show's name is tongue in appropriated cheek, as are its images.

Yet even though they're no reference to Walker Evans and James Agee's 1941 book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* — a touchstone, for sure, despite that infelicitous title — both the spirit of Evans's photographs and the work of his colleagues in the Farm Security Administration are here in Ruyter's first New York show since 2006 (she lives in Austria now). The group of ten paintings (and one print), made between 2011 and 2015 and on view at both of Eleven Rivington's Lower East Side spaces, takes archival photographs documenting this nation's Depression-era pain as a point of departure. Then Ruyter drives them to new and unsettling places.

For some years now Ruyter has deep-dived the Library of Congress's online archives, sifting through the tens of thousands of Depression-era images that are open-sourced for public use. You know the ones: Made when the FSA gave artists jobs (ah, the Roosevelt years!), they chronicle the country's suffering — those hit hardest by Dust Bowl droughts and joblessness. The photos at once validated pain and demanded empathy, even as they gave a bunch of unemployed people something to do. Thus the years between 1935 and 1944 yielded this country's first selfies: Major artists, from Evans to Dorothea Lange to Gordon Parks and Ben Shahn, acted as the filters through which we saw our fellow Americans. They also defined how we'd remember them.

Now the expat artist has gone and given those iconic images the Ruyter treatment: effectively feeding hallucinogens to otherwise sober pictures, making them radically more lively and psychedelic. Ruyter refocuses our attention from human suffering to surface effects of pattern and color. She does what she has done so many times before, whether with cemeteries or landscapes or New York club kids. Avoiding all traces of painterliness, she lays down flat, paint-by-numbers areas of pigment. A face materializes from a plane of peach paint in which a few pink and gray shapes indicate a nose or mouth, like Finger Lakes of color on a topographic map. Dimensional effects, if there are any, are achieved through plays of color. And Ruyter's palette, when it isn't Day-Glo, can best be described as bracing. At Eleven Rivington, that means her pictures give off a contact high even when their source images aren't nearly so jolly.

When Ruyter reworks a picture like Jack Delano: At a funeral of a member of an old Greene County family, the Boswells, Georgia, she transforms a document of a family into a meditation on pattern. Here she has cropped out much of the original photo — the tombstone, most of the mourners — to focus on two women, presumably in conversation. One has her back to us and wears a floral-print dress; her companion is mostly obscured. Thanks to Ruyter's arresting combination of green and orange, the dress and its pattern dominate. Nearby, the leaves of a shrub hum in an orange-yellow-burgundy camo pattern. Funeral? What funeral?

It's easiest to grasp Ruyter's sleight of hand when she spins a familiar image through her rose-colored time machine. She revisits Lange's ubiquitous Dust Bowl madonna, chin in hand, staring off into the distance as her children bury their faces in her hair. In Ruyter's version, here appearing as a print, Mom's worry lines and crow's-feet disappear like Botox for painting. Her eyes are a piercing blue under a brow set not in worry but something like determination, as if gathering strength. And check out her right forearm, here popping off the page in a shade of pea-green. For a certain generation that's Incredible Hulk-green, and it transforms this young mother into a graphic-novel heroine. Next thing you know, she's gonna slug you.

Such re-imaginings aren't the only conversations that occur in Ruyter's pictures. The work comes off as a series of hat-tips to its broad art-historical sources. The flatness of the images and the obsession with pattern call to mind Japanese prints by way of Édouard Vuillard and his gang of post-impressionists in late-nineteenth-century France. And what about Mary Cassatt, whose ghost haunts an intimate portrait of a mother and child at a day laborers' camp? Then of course there must be Sherrie Levine, the ur-appropriation artist who once presented Walker Evans's pictures as her own? Yes, Levine, too. And of course Andy Warhol and Pop.

But back to those Famous Men. The title is deployed with a wink, given that this show's central painting — a nearly twenty-foot-wide billboard of a thing — lets us praise nine anonymous ladies. A redo of Edwin Rosskam's photograph of a women's-club canning event, the piece encapsulates what Ruyter's work provokes and satisfies. The Rosskam original is a bit hokey, what with the ladies smiling beatifically at the mason jars like so many apostles at the Last Supper. In Ruyter's hands the ladies become bigger and better versions of their original selves — you might swear one was Eleanor Roosevelt herself, or that these are suffragettes planning a revolution. Popped with color and largely lineless, the figures are more electrifying — and their work more glamorous — than they ever were in life. Even as Ruyter performed her painterly plastic surgery, she created an unlikely band of heroes.