

Idols of the Mind: A Review of Ish Lipman at Andrew Rafacz

BY CHARLES VENKATESH YOUNG | MARCH 1, 2024



Ish Lipman, "Interlude," 2023, oil on canvas, 42" x 38" /Photo: Andrew Rafacz Gallery

The solitary figure is one of visual art's most well-trodden motifs, yet no two of its uses seem to signify the same thing—a lone individual at the center of a canvas meant something very different to, say, a nineteenth-century luminist than a painter of the postwar generation. Ish Lipman's current exhibit at Andrew Rafacz invents a new use for this motif, one strikingly pertinent in today's anxious age.

Lipman's outcasts and exiles would be unremarkable were it not for the awe-inducing landscapes in which they find themselves. Sullen blue-green skies are punctured by fierce chartreuse auroras above his tension-wrought horizon lines. Vast, swiveling plains lie beneath, accentuated by disconcertingly true-to-life slants of light—and I mean it when I say disconcerting. On the whole, the effect of his canvases' unnerving immediacy and near-infinite recession into pictorial space is visceral, corporeal horror, like looking into the center of a black hole. (The black hole comparison is bolstered by Lipman's sense of space, which is curvilinear: as objects get further from the viewer, they are twisted and spaghettified. One assumes they're eventually mere strings of atoms.)



Ish Lipman, "From Pond to Pathway," 2023, gouache on paper, 5.5" x 29.5" / Photo: Andrew Rafacz Gallery

Then we have his figures: slender, lovable, pathetic. Describing them is like making a rope out of sand, as their economical brushstrokes seem to contain every facet of human life. (Most prominently, the absurdity of the whole thing. Sometimes, we laugh so hard we cry. Then we elect presidents and declare wars. What the hell is this pomposity built upon? The obvious but never fully knowable answer: nothing.) A more extensive probing of their psychological content would be verbose and leave us all a little perturbed by our own perversity, so I've elected to explore something significantly more manageable—their art-historical significance.

Lipman takes more than a little from German romantic Caspar David Friedrich. The two share a propensity for situating unaccompanied figures in breathtaking landscapes, and for using the Rückenfigur—a visual motif in which a figure is depicted facing *away* from the viewer. Friedrich employed it in a blatantly symbolic manner: the figure views a landscape which represents his present state of being. A similar but more interior mechanism occurs in Edvard Munch's paintings, where a central figure's whirling surroundings reflect their turbulent sexuality and neuroticism. A common mission statement for the two: everything outside the Self is a reflection of the Self. Try looking at Lipman's figures through the same lens. You'll shiver a little: His vertiginous and unending landscapes are, frankly, terrifying. Anybody who sees their own life in these landscapes is either lying or deranged.



Ish Lipman, "Night Walk," 2023, oil on canvas, 59" x 78" /Photo: Andrew Rafacz Gallery

If the external world isn't a reflection of the Self, does it stand alone, independent of any human presence within it? Yes, answers Edward Hopper, whose quotidian scenes render metropolitan and suburban worlds completely indifferent to their inhabitants. An insidious loneliness permeates each of his tableaux. Yet Lipman doesn't seem more congenial to Hopper than the aforementioned romanticists. The terror-inducing beauty of his landscapes is *dependent* upon a witness, someone who can attest to their size and otherworldliness. (This effect

is twofold: first, Lipman's figures are captivated. Then, the viewer.) Without one, they'd evoke only some abstract mental notion of enormity and aesthetic satisfaction.

Lipman brings into being a world replete with contradictions: gargantuan and impersonal, yet dependent upon an observer's presence. Vast and unknowable, yet reliant upon a viewer's inquisitive tendencies to appear this way. They are disquieting the way early minimalist sculpture is: at first glance, needy and begging you to come hither, at which point they become vacant unsolvable enigmas.

Upon witnessing this transformation, you'll become acutely aware of your physical form, and, in turn, that of Lipman's figures: bumbling amorphous masses blotted against regular crystalline skies. Messy, out-of-place, dumb humanity, always asserting itself where it possesses the least authority. And dumb painting, which here serves only to witness its own impotence.

"Ish Lipman: Wind, Sand and Stars" is on view at Andrew Rafacz, 1749 West Chicago, through April 6.