

ArtReview

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Anna Ostoya *Slaying*

Bortolami Gallery, New York 25 February – 23 April

My first adjunct gig involved teaching an art-appreciation class to bored community college students in Texas. Among the challenges was the textbook, organised mostly around formal topics rather than historical movements.

I recall being jolted by the section on tenebrism, illustrated solely by Italian Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (c. 1625). The inclusion of the canvas, which depicts the knife-wielding biblical heroine Judith and her handmaiden with the decapitated head of the invading Assyrian general, was framed not by feminist analysis, but rather in terms of its lighting effects and 'heroic' composition. When I lectured about the painting, I included some historical context that the book withheld – not least that Gentileschi, who was raped by her artistic mentor, modelled Judith after herself.

For *Slaying* at Bortolami, New York-based Polish artist Anna Ostoya subjects to rigorous formal analysis Gentileschi's earlier, bloodier painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1614–20). In this canvas, strong-armed Judith plunges a sword into the neck of the naked Holofernes, who lies sprawled across a bed. In agony, the general attempts to push away Judith's equally muscular servant, holding him by the throat. Ostoya's paintings often pair early avant-garde artistic methods with politicised imagery; for the 2015 Biennale de Lyon, she created *Red, Blue*

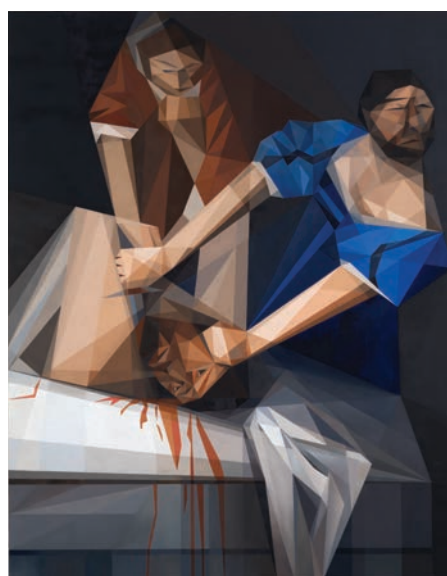
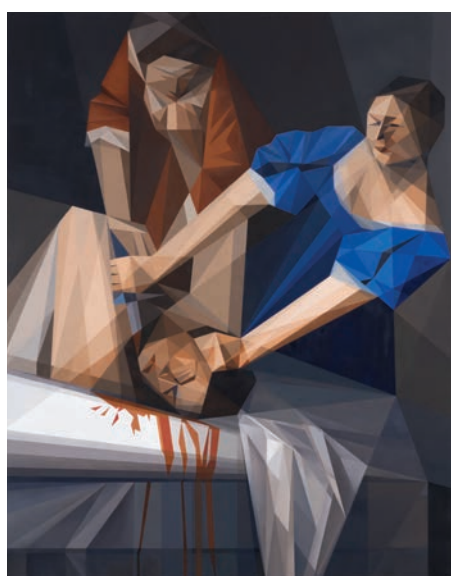
and *Yellow*, a triptych in primary colours that reworked photographs of an Yves Klein work, a march commemorating the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre and a film still from *Joan of Arc* (1928) in a faceted, abstract style. *Slaying* includes 12 geometric paintings based on Gentileschi's composition and over 40 digital collages from the *Slain Traces* series that layer and mirror aspects of the painting (all works 2016). According to the press release, Ostoya distances herself from a strict (second-wave) feminist interpretation of the work and goes for a statement that is more Lacanian or intersectional, depending on one's reading: 'the slaying is of the unknown "other" that endangers the vulnerable "I"'.

The large front gallery displays Ostoya's cubist-inspired oil-on-canvas renderings of Gentileschi's work. Using a palette of ultramarine blue, earthy brown, black and white, Ostoya paints details and nearly full-scale renderings of the Baroque composition. In a corner, two versions of the painting with same-gendered protagonists and antagonists face off: *Holofernes Slaying Holofernes* and *Judith Slaying Judith*. Beside these works, each nearly the size of Gentileschi's, are closeup views of the slaughtered heads. Ostoya's choice of cubist technique and her gender-switching subjects aim to underscore the universality and very real consequences of political, patriarchal violence – such as contemporary conflicts in the Middle East, whose

beheadings have become Western front-page news – in which culture is always implicated.

Modestly scaled pieces from the *Slain Traces* series, simple inkjet prints with additions of acrylic in a few instances – they look like X-rays of a bodily pathogen – fill the back gallery. These associative works reveal the digital and subjective traces of Ostoya's process. In *Two Faces, A Model and an Actress*, for instance, she merges the face of a calm Gentileschi female figure with a YouTube still (complete with a scroll bar) of Isabelle Adjani from the 1981 body-horror film *Possession*. In other examples, elements such as Ostoya's own portrait as a teenager, forms from Georgia O'Keeffe's organic abstractions, a robot head and Picasso motifs of a guitar and a mask variously suggest processes of identity formation and colonisation. For a show that downplays the gendered aspects of violence, there are moments of shocking rage: in *Beheading, Castrating and Blinding with Gray Shards*, the mouths of two decapitated men's heads are stuffed with castrated penises, and an Oedipal dagger is stabbed through an eye.

Ostoya's thesis is that Gentileschi's original painting goes beyond an allegorical 'slaying' of male violence towards women. Still, her message resonates most powerfully when she embraces the feminist content of the original work, coupling it with her own fantasies of crushing toxic masculinity. Wendy Vogel



Judith Slaying Judith and *Holofernes Slaying Holofernes*,
both 2016, oil on canvas, 199 × 158 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Bortolami Gallery, New York