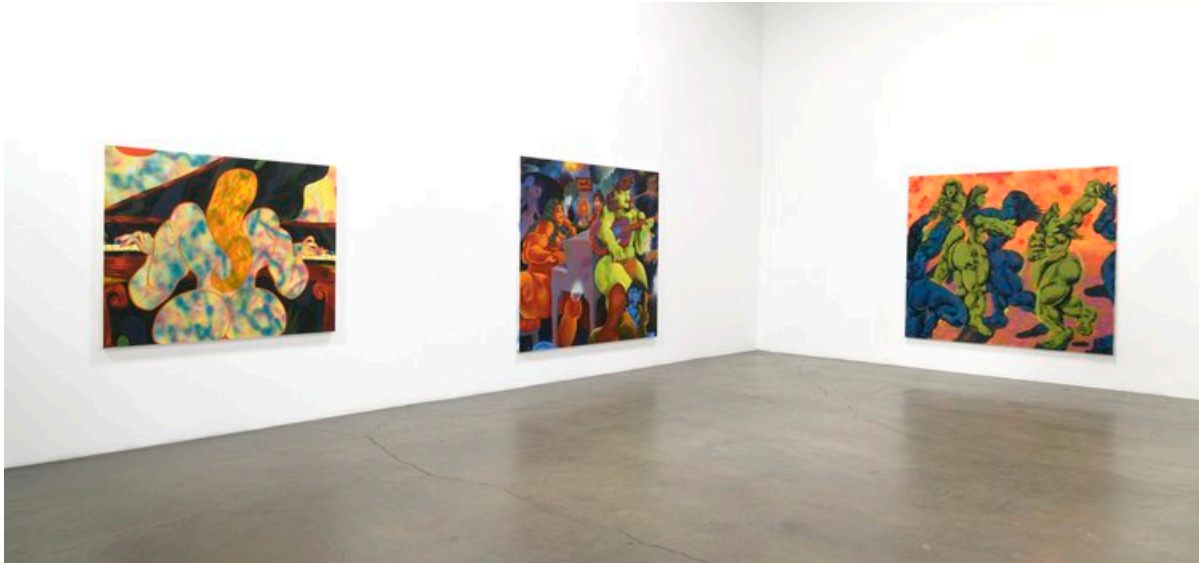


# Morgan Presents

February 15—March 28, 2020  
Richard Heller Gallery, Los Angeles

## ***Ana Benaroya: Teach Me Tonight***



### **Ana Benaroya & The Epic Poem**

In her exhibition *Teach Me Tonight*, Ana Benaroya uncovers a hidden world, charged with an atmosphere of desire. While this series of paintings can be understood as a cohesive unit, each work presents a world unto itself, populated by a differing set of characters and possessing its own unique qualities—both formal and narrative.

Epic poetry provides a compelling lens through which to consider this body of work. The Epic as a literary form is characterized by an episodic structure and a narrative arc centered around a journeying protagonist. Homer's *Odyssey* and Dante's *Inferno* serve as exemplars of this genre. The Epic stands in contrast to the mosaic, where each individual tile is meaningless outside of its role in forming a larger unified image, in that the Epic's constitutive episodes can exist autonomously. These episodes contribute towards a larger narrative arc, but the focus remains on the vignettes themselves. The same can be said of this series: each of Benaroya's paintings exists independently from a larger structure, yet remain in dialogue through constructing this universe of desire. The characters remain in focus, independent of the narrative arc. Just as each

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of Dante's *Cantos* presents a character study of the sinner, while simultaneously adding a movement towards the Pilgrim's journey through hell, each painting presents a new set of characters and another facet of desire.

This desire, however, is not one burdened by sin, shame or vulgarity; rather it inspires a playful joy, in the way a flirtation with a stranger might. We are charged with possibility, unsure of what may come next around the corner. We feel this excitement in our stomachs; it is not an explicit eroticism, but rather a secret world that Benaroya has revealed by pulling back the curtain—a world we now share with her and each other.

One origin of joy in Benaroya's paintings can be located in her love of color. Color saturates the picture plane, providing both the setting for activity and the substantiation of the figures themselves. We find built up trenches of paint, existing both as locks of hair and as color reserves. We must recognize that this love of color is not to the detriment, or in conflict with *line* in Benaroya's paintings. Rather, color and line exist as voices in harmony, unifying to create something bigger than themselves.

The strength of *line* in Benaroya's work, and its continuous dialogue with color, is apparent in the works *Almost Like Being in Love* and *Be My Baby*. In the first of these paintings, line creates and edifies these figures in dance—they are brought further into being with each brushstroke. Comparatively, in *Be My Baby*, these lines serve almost as a photographic negative against the backdrop of a darkened color field; here *line* serves as the figures' contour, rather than as their substantiation.

Let us return to consider the idea of this series as an Epic journey: who, or where is our Virgilian guide? To progress into these works is to recognize desire as our guide; desire as a distinctly womanly presence, guiding us towards, or perhaps in pursuit of the female figure.

From the outset of this journey we enter a portal of desire; along our journey we encounter solitary figures, caught in private moments of reflection, as well as character ensembles evoking the figures adorning Ancient Greek vases—embracing the allusions of instructive muses and indulgences.

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Only in one painting, *Teach Me Tonight*, are we denied the individual identity of its protagonist; perhaps we might recognize this faceless figure as the silhouette of our own guiding desire. Benaroya demands we participate in this world of escapism, requiring us to engage with our own desires and fill in the impulses and identities left out of frame. We, the viewer, are the journeying protagonist of her epic.

Not to suggest that this indulgence of desire is purely erotic, or even lustful, but we must acknowledge an unaddressed undercurrent, a darker aspect to these paintings. The degree to which we choose to confront this ominous feeling, however, relies back on that participatory element. This undercurrent will exist regardless. The essential distinction between this series of paintings and other Epics is that the journey of the viewer through this series is participatory and not didactic.

We have been invited into Benaroya's aforementioned *imaginary* as equals, not as readers. Benaroya welcomes us into her world: stay for a drink, or one too many—whatever your desire, you can satiate it here.

—Morgan Aguiar-Lucander