

# ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

## Armando Reverón

Andrew Edlin Gallery

By Barry Schwabsky



Armando Reverón, *La cueva* (The Cave), 1920, oil on canvas, 41 × 62".

Certain painters seem to have a paradoxical aim: to capture the intangibility of the visible via haptic form, rendering our physical realm with a scrupulous delicacy of touch. Pierre Bonnard did something like this, as did the underrated Italian modernist Filippo de Pisis. Such an inclination, “to [not] flaunt substance (charcoal, ink, oil paint) but to *permit it to linger*” was identified in Cy Twombly’s art by Roland Barthes, who recognized that “the being of things is not in their heaviness but in their lightness.” To the ranks of these elect painters of lingering substance, I now nominate Armando Reverón (1889–1954), a Venezuelan artist whose imagery seems to dissolve before one’s eyes, the better to reveal the sparing quanta of pigmented matter that compose (and decompose) it.

The earliest work in “Prisoner of the Air”—the first Reverón show in New York since a 2007 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—was *La cueva* (The Cave), 1920. The canvas depicts a pair of lounging courtesans: slightly chubbier descendants of Goya’s *majas*, Delacroix’s harem girls, Manet’s *Olympia*, or the models Matisse was painting around the same time in Nice, France. Reverón’s beguiling figures seem more like condensations of the nebulous gray-blue atmosphere that surrounds them—but it might be more apposite to say that this mist inhabits the women as much as they inhabit it. In a later treatment of a similar subject, *Odaliscas* (Odalisques), 1937, the demimondaines, no longer facing a presumed gentleman caller, seemed lost in their separate thought-worlds. The palette has grown exceedingly pale, and Reverón’s brush marks have separated out and situated the ladies inside an incomprehensible architecture.

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That chromatic pallor suffused the landscapes on view here as well: *Vista del playon* (View of the Beach), 1929, seemed as though it were painted with bleach. One might have thought that with *Playa* (Beach), 1941, Reverón had challenged himself to leave his traces on the canvas using the driest brush. The darkest tones in some of these works were sections of untouched canvas. And was that even oil paint in *Muelle de las goletas* (Pier of the Schooners), 1941, as the checklist would have had us believe? The sparse marks seem to have settled here and there like dust, or accumulated like mold, forming the almost latent image of boats around a dock, with a building on the shore and hills in the background. The scene is exceedingly vaporous, as evanescent as Christ's face on the Shroud of Turin; you got the feeling that one errant breath would blow it all away.

Amid the washed-out hazes and velleities of color, the rare appearance of a more emphatic or opaque mark can give one a salutary shock. In the portrait-like *Mujer en V* (Woman in V), 1937, an underlayer of blackish clothing—in the shape of the namesake letter, emerging from a pink, low-cut collar—seemed ready to fly off the painting like a startled bird. In a more comical vein, the high kicks of the naked dancers in *Bailarinas* (Ballerinas), 1948, revealed the darkened patches between their legs as the most salient points in the composition. It's curious that an artist who is at heart such a sensualist—and with a sense of humor besides—should realize his volupté with such material asceticism. That paradox gives Reverón's art its fascinating quality.