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The mysterious women of Rosa Loy's paintings

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Propaganda and art are often thought of as opposites: The former rehashing clichés to serve the powers that be, and the latter inspiring individuals to believe they are in the presence of something special — a unique human expression, unlike anything else in the world.

At Kohn Gallery, the 19 pictures that Rosa Loy has painted during the last five years reveal that both ideas are silly — and that art and propaganda have more in common than is usually assumed.

Born in 1958 in a small town in what was East Germany, Loy trained to paint as a Social Realist: an artist-citizen whose readily accessible works depict everyday folks enjoying their labors — industrial and agrarian — as they toiled for the greater good.

But, being an artist, Loy questioned everything, including her education. She paid attention to the arts in Western Europe and in the United States. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, the dialogue between East and West kicked into high gear.

Pretty quickly, Loy's paintings came to combine the best of both. "So Near and Yet So Far," her second solo show in Los Angeles, consists of pictures equally at home in a children's storybook, on the walls of a museum or in the journal of a sharp-eyed woman. The shape-shifting ambidexterity of Loy's paintings is a testament to her capacity to understand reality as a multilayered mixture of facts and feelings, sensations and sentiments, outlooks and insights, selves and others.

Past and present likewise commingle in Loy's subtle paintings. Each seems to spring from a particularly vivid reverie. Each could be a self-portrait.

But unlike most types of portraiture, Loy's stylized — even quasi-anonymous — figures are never isolated, autonomous or painted as if they stand alone in the world, unique to themselves and heads and shoulders above others.

On the contrary, they are down to earth and approachable. All are depicted in relationships — to another woman or often to two, three or more.

Sometimes Loy's figures look like sisters. Maybe twins. Or perhaps the same woman at different times in her life. Or the same woman, in the same moment, when she is of two minds about something.

Relationships between mothers and daughters come to mind. So do relationships between and among best friends, former selves, future selves, best selves, worst selves and all their selves in between.

Throughout "So Near and Yet So Far," the reality of the visible world exists alongside — or right on top of — the reality of memory, the reality of the imagination and the reality of fantasy. Hopes and dreams jostle regrets and sorrows, creating a bittersweet realm of great complexity, resonance and richness.