

# Los Angeles Times

## What do you see? The curious allure of Linda Stark's playful imagery

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Condensation is at work when droplets of water form on glasses filled with cold drinks and when winter storms dump tons of snow in the Sierra Nevada. Freud used the same term to describe the ways dreams form: collecting and compressing memories and inklings until they cohere into stories that follow a logic all their own.

That is what happens in Linda Stark's "Painted Ladies," an exhibition of nine delicate drawings and two knockout paintings at the L.A. gallery Jenny's. Packing loads of information into stark symbols and iconic compositions, the L.A. painter creates point-blank images whose elusiveness intensifies their emotional resonance.

In one page-size drawing, the hood of a venomous cobra frames a portrait of the smiling artist. Both sinister and silly, Stark's image defies cut-and-dried interpretations.

In two other drawings, both with bright red backgrounds, the silhouette of a woman's reproductive system — as it might be represented in a biology textbook — resembles a bull's head and horns, much like the ones Picasso painted when he wanted to emphasize his virility. Stark's playful pictures also include pairs of lovely eyes, each of which resembles those that appear on Buddhist temples and in sacred representations.

An abstract mermaid, the bleeding web of a black widow, the beard of an ancient pharaoh, a constellation in the shape of a star and a waterfall of rainbow-tinted tears round out Stark's subjects. All make the world of waking reality seem to barely scratch the surface of the world her art tunes us into.

The way Stark paints and draws has a lot to do with that. The surfaces of her two canvases, "Coat of Arms" and "Fixed Wave," are sculpted, every square inch an exquisitely textured love poem to the physical facts of oil paint, its viscosity, sheen and tint becoming subjects in their own right.

Likewise, her works on paper combine the precision of a master tattoo artist with the fastidiousness of architectural blueprints, the innocence of children and the power of X-rays, which allow us to see beneath the surface of things. Infinite mystery spills from Stark's art, catching visitors in an undertow laced with anxiety and redeemed by devotion.

