

rachel uffner

Art in America

Shara Hughes

ATLANTA, at Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia

By Stephanie Cash

Shara Hughes manages to balance content and style in canvases that are by turns fantastical and ordinary, and usually tinged with humor. Her exuberantly gestural semi-



Shara Hughes:
Hurricane Hughes,
2014
oil, enamel, acrylic
and spray-paint on
canvas
48 by 50 inches
at MOCA GA.

abstractions tend to elicit an "ahhh, painting" response. Often difficult to decipher, the works are packed with painterly effects and layered with meaning, albeit elusive. Scenes of improbable activities are as common as those of domestic familiarity. At times, when Hughes's content is mystifying, her playful brushwork and sense of color take center stage. Yet she can just as easily shift attention—hers and ours—to the figures and their peculiar dramas.

Earlier this year Hughes completed a residency at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in Florida, where she was one of

10 artists selected by instructor Dana Schutz. The two artists share a penchant for highly colorful compositions full of sometimes grim jokes and odd personal references. Originally from Atlanta, Hughes received her BFA in 2004 from the Rhode Island School of Design and lived in New York before returning to her hometown in 2008. This exhibition of 10 paintings, titled "Guess You Had to Be There," was the culmination of a yearlong Working Artist Project fellowship at MOCA GA, which included a studio assistant and stipend.

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Hughes describes her process as organic and a bit surrealistic. She begins with a color wash on gessoed canvas and then lets the paint and her unconscious take the lead. Figures, both full and partial, have become more prevalent in her new work. Elongated arms, for example, meander around a number of the canvases—including the romantically titled *My Hero* (2014)—embracing, trapping, pushing, pulling.

By these intuitive means, Hughes arrives at such memorable results as *Green Monster* (2013), rendered in a delightfully bilious palette. The green backward-looking figure stands on a riverbank, one hand covering the face and torso of a long-haired, probably female figure with what look like white streamers studded with tiny daggers and fruits. Whether the gesture is one of consolation or torture is unclear.

Hurricane Hughes (2014), a predominantly blue canvas, features two upright figures striding toward each other and a third that floats horizontally above the sidewalk alongside a fish. From the upper left, a fantastic wave, rendered in thick, luscious strokes and dollops of white paint, crashes over one upright figure's pink head. It's a chaotic scene where nothing is quite normal.

Hughes veers Matissean in paintings like *Let's Grow Up Together* (2013), in which combinations of color and pattern visually override the figures. In this case, a woman with a basket of blue flowers on her arm holds hands with a man offering a bowl of fruit, the lushness of the faceted composition offset by a striated wall in the background. A less happy couple, facing away from each other, a glass bowl of three sad fish between them, appears in *Mr. and Mrs. Bright Side* (2013).

Even when Hughes is depicting such less-than-happy moments, her buoyant colors and lively mark-making reassure us that, somehow, everything will be okay.