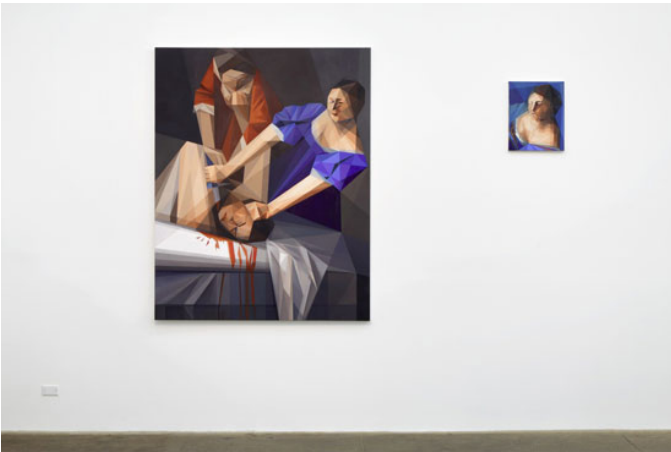


## Really Killer: Anna Ostoya's Judith

by Katelynn Mills

*Anna Ostoya: Slaying at Bortolami*

February 25 to April 23, 2016 520  
West 20th Street (between 10th and 11th avenues)  
New York, 212 727 2050



Installation view of "Anna Ostoya: Slaying," 2016, at Bortolami. Courtesy of Bortolami.

It's a rare and noteworthy instance when an exhibition is so lacking in substance that nothing can really be said in its defense — Anna Ostoya's current show, "Slaying," at Bortolami achieves this. The content here revolves around an investigation of Artemisia Gentileschi's painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1614–20), by way of Cubist reproductions of the original image. The renderings are half-heartedly self indulgent, devoid of any inkling of the humanity, blood, or violence that the original conveys, and they insult all that is interesting about Cubist space. They don't even offer a systematic investigation leading from one study to the next. Rather in choosing to pursue an associative, as opposed to an analytical approach, the artist strips away any chance the viewer may have to find meaning in this series. As the press release points out, "art making is like the act of slaying — an archaic activity, quite brutal when taken seriously. Facing reality can feel as brutal as a beheading," [sic]. But Ostoya's investigations are anything but brutal. Actually, if any congratulations should be given for the show, they are deserved for her ability to make a decapitation look blasé.

Looking at *Holofernes Slaying Holofernes* (all works 2016), on a formal level, we see generalized forms that suggest Cubism but read more like computer-generated animation, neutral colors, and a democratic placement of emphasis. In this study, Ostoya has given the slayer and the slain the head of Holofernes. In another study, *Judith Slaying Judith*, with all the same considerations, she has given the two main characters Judith's head. One untitled work is a close-up of Judith's head, applying, yet again, all the same aesthetic concerns of digital-looking fractured planes. And then there's *Holofernes*, which is the same thing as Judith's close-up, except it's Holofernes, but for some reason it's titled, whereas the Judith portrait isn't. There's an even more generalized study, *Untitled*, which is the same as the other paintings, only there aren't really any heads, everything turned to abstract polygons.

One must question the arbitrary and flippant nature of the formal changes occurring from one painting to the next. Ostoya claims to move away from a commonly utilized feminist reading of this painting towards a gender-neutral depiction that speaks to some ambiguous, ubiquitous hazard in which "the slaying of the unknown 'other' endangers the vulnerable 'I'." Whatever that means. In being capricious and vague, the only thing this artist risks is boring the viewer to death. What's more is that the undermining of the feminist interpretation of this painting takes power away from women at the present and vital time in art's history where women are only beginning to be treated as equals to the white men.

Perhaps it is the complete severance from exegesis, as biblical apocrypha and the history of the original painting, which is what initiated the chaos and meaninglessness present in the exhibition. In the Old Testament, Judith was an actual, Israeli heroine who tricked the Assyrian general, Holofernes into drinking too much. And when he was asleep, she came to his quarters and decapitated the oppressor of her people with the help of her lovely, young maidservant. Gentileschi, whose given name was derived from Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, was considered to be one of the most accomplished painters of the Baroque period (a time no less when it was impossible for women to pursue painting in the first place). She was raped by her mentor and excused for his crime in court.

Despite the brutal injustices she faced, she continued to paint and created, what one would speculate as a form of catharsis and vindication, her masterpiece *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.

But there is no trace of that history here. In a smaller side gallery, a series of inkjet prints serve as a sort of footnote to Ostoya's thesis. It's a whole mess of Photoshopped versions of the original painting reiterating the same ideas in her oil versions. In many of the prints, the painting's elements are superimposed over each other; in others, yet another layer of confusion is added through the introduction of non-sequential information such as geometric design, color splatters, and robots.

Walking away from this exhibition one is reminded of the importance of clarity over cleverness; that often plain, well-considered ideas can say much more — and may even allow one to get away with murder