Artemisia Gentileschi Addresses a Student by Bill Sullivan

Inspired by *Judith and Her Maid Servant* by Artemisia Gentileschi

Yes, one last stroke of crimson-- blood dripping from his severed head-- and the painting is done. I will title it “Judith and Her Maidervant” but prefer "The Bastard's Head in a Basket." However, Signorina, a woman artist, today, has to be quite discrete and shrewd.

O how it would please me to have his testicles lying in that basket, to have the women that Tassi raped and me circling, dancing about his emasculated body, chanting curses. But what academy or patron would sanction that? As it is, Medici keeps my beheading of the Assyrian in a closet, so it's a more subtle art I practice. Who can object to painting biblical tales?

But my Judith is not squeamish, frail or ambivalent. True, she wears her alluring gown, a deep aubergine with gold embroidery and fancy lace, and yes pearl earrings but only to trap the unsuspecting general. Look at her strong body, her unrepentant eyes and how firmly she grips the sword, rests the blade on her shoulder, looking as fierce and determined as Saint George.

Note the ornamental pin in Judith's hair. Do you see the cameo with its image of David slaying Goliath? That's my aim, the weak overcoming the mighty, done in oils, in the midst of shadows and light.

Two women, listening for a guard's alarm, their ashen trophy secured, now plot their escape. Abra, however, is not Caravaggio's crone. No, she is as young as I was when Tassi first assaulted me. See how Judith has her arm atop Abra's shoulder. They are a team, noble and peasant, lady and maid, defeating lechery. It's Abra who will carry our symbol of victory and independence to all my besieged sisters. Does the painting move you, speak to you, Signorina?