

Robert Brinker **foul play**

**New large-scale cut-paper drawings
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Essay by Cydney Payton

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The Blade Diary

Cydney Payton

Robert Brinker's work is girly. It has pluck.

Over the last ten years Brinker's bunnies, bears, and teapots (only a few of the many figures) have been drawn out of bittersweet eras where idle time was fantastic or constrained. In *Kinesthetic Pets* 1998, yarn is employed to outline clumsy, chunky furframed woodland and domestic creatures. The format--reminiscent of pages from cook, comic, children's and coloring books--builds instantly appealing narratives. Yet, Brinker exploits the seemingly naïve into sensual sequential art. A search to discover what is inside the blackened frame of preexisting lines, or to seek what endgame exists beyond in the fleshy toned wooden-chipped fray, begins.

There is a quality to Brinker, and his work process, that exudes an aura of being a displaced male amid county fairs of craft culture. His transparent interest in the sheer material potential of the tactile underscores that



Kinesthetic Pets, 1998, Yarn, Collage and Acrylic on Paper and Canvas, 10 pieces at 20x24 inches each

reading. Butterfly, cloud, and circus shapes,¹ floral and natural motifs, as well as drawings on teabags² have, over the years, given the work its feminine mystique.

Historical references to stencil, silhouette, and crochet art suggest points of intersection with contemporary artists such as Lari Pittman, Kara Walker, and Mike Kelley. Like Pittman's style, Brinker's series *Cover Girl* 2005, shows line and color razor-cut out of pin-ups pictures into sexually charged and explicit commentaries on pop culture. Walker is noted for depicting the cruel complex history of the American South through cut black paper figures on white backgrounds and creating marvelous dramas infused with bewildered rage. While Brinker's work is opposite of Walker's stylistically, they both freely associate the folkloric wonderment of childhood with the hypertension of neoncoated adult neurosis. Both Kelley and Brinker play with toys. Their examination and critique of the play culture, as well as their participation in it, tend to the visually suggestive. As a kind of matterist, for Brinker the fragility of desire for an object or matter (material/substance) is psychologically dense and possessing, regardless of art trends.

What has emerged in Brinker's work since the late 90s' could be considered descendant from the early Disney Studio where an American hybrid of Romanticism came to life cinematically. The animation team at the Studio culled from its own library (later named the Animation Research Library) that shelved a large number of European artworks, illustrations and illuminated manuscripts. Disney's first feature-length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, based on the Brothers Grimm, took its villainous queen from a painting by George de Feure.³

The subconscious exudes in Brinker's paper work through the uncontrolled verbosity and defiance of the line-work in his art making. That same complexity appears in the still image from an animation of the Peter Pan film that depicts Captain Hook taunting Tinker Bell.⁴ They face off. Bell's tiny winged-figure challenges the giant frame of the mustached one-



Marshan, 1999, Acrylic and Stains on Tea Bag, 8.5x5.5 inches



Cover Girl #2, 2004, Cut Paper and Collage, 16x13 inches



Mary Blair, *Peter Pan, Tinker Bell and Captain Hook*, sequence 11, scene 23, 1953 production background, Burbank, California

armed Hook. It is at once, innocence lost and forever unbridled.

Brinker's line has arrived at a place both comely and direct. When illustrative, the work departs from Andy Warhol's handsome anemic forks, spoons, and platters portrayed in the 60s' edition of the *Joy of Cooking*. It mucks about in the scrapes and leftovers that shock us out of childhood into adulthood, and if you're lucky, like Brinker, the heroic stays intact to challenge the lame.

From the beginning of his artist effort, Brinker has borrowed from a cache of found images. This pile of recollections, displayed as artifacts, enters his studio practice. Collections of data and ideas are as wide ranging as Mexican pornography and vintage aprons. Brinker is fond of things that others have owned first. Possessed with the traces of their *otherness* these objects are deconstructed by Brinker from that *otherness*. Layering monoprints, wood blocks, and digital prints into collaged combines has been Brinker's stock. Even when more classical use of pastel, ink, or acrylic has been employed such as in the *Jamaica Series* 2000, texture is still a point of departure, rice paper serving the role of canvas.



Jamaica Series #6, 2000, Acrylic, Ink and Pastel on Rice Paper, 72x39 inches

Brinker attended the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), in the hometown of *The Hairy Who*⁵, with artists Gladys Nilsson and Jim Nutt. These artists pulled subjects, "from the lower depths of the American visual vernacular. Yet, as if to resist the model set by New York, they tended toward an especially impudent coarseness and vulgarity in their work."⁶ Ed Paschke is also important to note for his portrait experiments with painting, digital and photographic media. He too is also often associated with that group of noted Chicago artists.

Arturo Herrera⁷, Jeff Koons and Peter Saul are all likely bedfellows for considering Brinker's work as well. Not only does their work connect to the *Hairy Who* legacy, it unravels the androgynous character of Pop Art. Brinker has arrived at a form that takes in fragments of Disney or fairytale characters while modifying them into fetish narratives for the age of the ever-deconstructing ghost of Pop Art. The

distinction between cartoon and pornography thus becomes an attempt to define, in graphic terms, the genetic variance between Donald Duck and Ron Jeremy.

In Brinker's *Downdraft* 2006, one can also see enchanting and ejaculatory line work resembling that of Chicago-born, contemporary artist, Sue Williams. Additive process moves into reductive technique. Taken from years of collecting pages of cutouts, Brinker creates a plus-minus effect. He molds the line into vernal stasis. Genitals balance on one another like a paper-doll-chain orgy. The memory of former figures is embedded in the excreted slender shapes. The competing layers hold lyrical allure, and when examined closer, are wickedly profane.



Downdraft, 2006, Graphite, Cut Paper and Mylar, 30x44 inches
Collection of Stan and Marion Bergman, New York, NY

Today Brinker mixes his age-of-innocence artistic vocabulary with a darker wand. His attention seems to be in *the naked space between actual image and non-image* where the line jumps off into a visual void. We can tease out the body parts in negative and positive twinness. The muted hues of buff, silver grey, peach and brown offer more raunch than spectacle, blade than scissors.

Cydney Payton,
Executive Director and Chief Curator MCA DENVER.

1 Reference to 2002 series.

2 Reference to work from 1999 through 2001.

3 *La Femme au Chapeau Noir*, 1898-1900, oil on canvas, private collection; *Once Upon a Time Walt Disney, The Sources of Inspiration for the Disney Studios*, Prestel, Verlag, Munich-Berlin-London- New York 2006.

4 Mary Blair, *Peter Pan, Tinker Bell and Captain Hook*, sequence 11, scene 23, 1953, production background, Burbank, California.

5 Formed, Chicago, IL in 1966.

6 Ed Paschke 1939-2004, "looking in a... virtual direction...Hairy Who post-human semiotics", accessed at <http://www.artn.com/PostCanvas/PostPaschke.htm> on 01/07/2008.

7 Herrera was a graduate student at UIC when Brinker was an undergraduate.