

Delirium

Several vectors of impulse and intent converge in Robert Brinker's buoyant new paintings. Brinker has for a long time collected and used images from popular culture, often on the more lurid side, in his paintings, prints, and collages: cartoon characters from sugary cereal boxes, adult graphic porn collected from newsstands and bookstores all over the western hemisphere, Disney imagery, candy wrappers, fashion magazines, art reproductions often manipulated beyond recognition, and his own photographs from travels to Europe, Jamaica, and around the country. He mulches this codex into a visual stream of consciousness that runs along gyrating ribbons and cartoonishly stretching and/or bulging interlocking and overlapping planes that fill the picture plane and expand beyond it. Sometimes these elastic planes open back to flat color, and at other times there is an atmospheric gradation like the printer's "rainbow roll" in old Apollo Theater posters, just toned down in color. When any of these ribbons or planes describes a modeled space and volume, it is local to that specific form in that specific location. As in a Pollock painting or a Frank Gehry façade, the loci of highlighted details are distributed all over the picture plane, making it impossible from a reasonable distance to give the full force of your attention to any one part of any painting. Somehow the result isn't chaos but a vibrant visual field loaded with secrets. Step back from these paintings and in true modernist fashion they optically fill the "real" space of the room between you and them. Move in close and you can find fragments of all Brinker's obsessions in hallucinatory recombinant sequences.

An accomplished printmaker, Brinker is fascinated by the complex visual spaces that painstaking techniques can deliver; and the intricacies of his patterns owe much of their development to the popular Chinese art of floral and animal paper cut outs, which he has typically mastered. Many of the paintings are initiated in small collages that combine cut paper and colored pencil. As with the preparatory drawings and collages of such artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Nicholas Krushenick, Brinker's cut paper studies for his paintings are compelling in their own right. They bristle with the material traces of the decision making process, a lively mark making, and the topographical shifts of paper edges.

The cut paper and graphic materials are the "analog" side of Brinker's preparation for his paintings. Much of the mapping of the work takes place digitally with the images then projected. The painting itself is carefully hand rendered. The results of this complex range of sources and techniques are a body of work that looks back and forward in one of the more wide-ranging conversations with painting culture one is likely to find. The paintings on canvas hearken back to the polished surfaces of the Surrealism that invokes a hyper reality, such as paintings by Dali and Tanguy, but also Americans like Kay Sage. Brinker's curving ribbons or bands also invoke baroque spatiality, while their overall distribution and figure/field separation suggest, consecutively, Pollock and Miro's *Constellation* gouaches. The imbedded images could have a wonderful conversation with the louche burlesques of Chicago school imagery from the Seventies and Eighties, along with collages of John Ashbery

and Joe Brainard. The cool sheen of the hand-worked finish of the paintings and their rendering of reflecting surfaces, recall Rosenquist's work of the last several years, but Brinker is also interested in the more open structures and processes of Rosenquist's collages.

But it is Francis Picabia's paintings that perhaps provide the richest comparison. In a conversation this last August, I mentioned to Brinker how much his painting *Finger Tangle* (2010-2011) reminded me of the dynamic mechanistic Cubist paintings Picabia made in 1913 and 1914. Brinker subsequently showed me an email that his gallerist, Francis Naumann, had sent him in March, making the same comparison and sending reproductions of several Picabia paintings from the period to drive home the point. The correspondence between the scale and rhythms of each painter's curving forms and compositions is remarkable. But the layered imagery in Brinker's paintings and their deliberately cheesy sources (which he rehabilitates and renders lovely, as if in a dream) also recall Picabia's paintings from the 1940s in which he superimposed outlines of "glamorous" French nudes from magazines such as *Paris Sex-Appeal* over stupefyingly deadpan portraits of equally faux romantic men and women. Many of these paintings ended up in North African brothels after an Algerian merchant bought them and sold them on, an outcome that would no doubt charm Brinker. Picabia's mechanical superimposition of layers of cartoon line over seemingly earnestly dumb portiture, the ambiguity around the extent of his own sincerity, and the precedent these paintings set for both Sigmar Polke and David Salle make these paintings look stranger, funnier, and more talismanically beautiful over time. Brinker's painting is addressed to the sensibility that finds itself deeply pleased by Picabia's late campiness while craving a greater formal depth.

At the risk of sounding campy myself, I'll assert that serious painters know they're talking with the living and the dead through their own ambition. Those who appreciate serious painting feel like they are eavesdropping on this conversation. To marvel at Brinker's new paintings is to "listen in," so to speak, on such an illuminating and funny conversation.

Stephen Westfall

Stephen Westfall is an artist and writer living in Brooklyn, NY