



NANCY BAKER
RALEIGH

Over the years, Nancy Baker's iconography has come to include relatively familiar appropriations and deliberate misappropriations from illuminated manuscripts, cartoons, and pop art. Today, a medieval jester on the ground and a modern clown falling out of space may join in a single hermetic narrative. And yet, despite her expanding archive of characters and events, every carefully wrought new piece seems freshly minted. In *Sticker Shock*, her recent exhibition of fourteen paintings old and new and a sprawling, complex wall installation, she makes her point with a new clarity [Flanders Art Gallery; December 7, 2007—January 3, 2008].

The installation comprises well over a thousand disparate images. Most are attached to wooden buttons large, small, and tiny, suggesting that no idea, memory or experience can ever be trusted to remain in place. Dominating the wall, round pupils of various sizes and colors—blue, brown, hazel—incoherently examine an incoherent world. Baker grew up near Coney Island in Brooklyn, and a number of buttons bear the grinning face that once advertised the Steeplechase Park she reveled in. But every one of these faces is slightly different, often marred in some way. More soberly, Baker supplies a number of memento mori, an image of a skull reminding us of one reality that always awaits us, no matter how we see it. In one of the most brilliant conceptual touches of the piece, Baker has covered clusters of buttons, not with images, but with blindingly bright green and pink glitter, suggesting that they may hold experiences we are altogether blind to.

Of the more recent paintings, *Drippy Flowers*, 2007, is a fine study in ambiguity. The brilliant coloration—bright purples, blues, greens, reds, and oranges—may mediate the underlying theme of cannibalization. Unrelated to each other, plucked from various elsewheres, and lovingly repainted by Baker, blossoms, fruits, ferns, abstract designs, Adam and Eve, and a blue-faced monkey form a band around the edges of the

painting. They leave a great open space in the center, where three hummingbirds hungrily attack a cluster of seedpods. Great purple drops fall to a lake, turning it orange, yellow and ochre, though one drop goes into the maw of a cannibal flower.

Far more crowded, complex, and funny is *Pubic Wars II*, 2006, where nothing, certainly not perspective, is quite as it should be. Buzz bombs and a pop UFO complete with force rays fly above medieval castles, royal tents, and various invasion forces. In the castles, men wearing crusader crosses slaughter each other, as well as women and babes. But Baker refuses to take any of this very seriously. In the lower right, nearly lost in the melee, a soldier wielding a crossbow turns a crank that is not attached to anything; behind him a cannon spews fire without effect. In the lower left, another soldier carelessly pushes his spear into a fellow's anus. Not quite lost, however, and something Baker may take seriously, is a vignette where several merchants, presumably from two or more sides of the battle, exchange gold.

A small group of paintings are built around a central image surrounded by webs of interlaced designs. Amongst them, the fascinating *I Go to Pieces*, 2006, appears to disclose Baker's mindset. At the center of the piece, a jester bears a near-lifeless tree on one shoulder, while prison bars lie below. Though the designs surrounding him are quite lovely, they also imprison the jester, for whom paint represents both freedom and bars.

—Max Halperen