

I'm With Nature

Ryan Steadman
Paul Brainard
Brooklyn Front
DUMBO

Brooklyn Front presents an alluring array of paintings by Paul Brainard and Ryan Steadman, ranging from the uncanny to the goofy to the aggressively blank.

The paintings of Brainard and Steadman are opposite in their temperature and direction. Whereas Steadman's work is cool and circular, Brainard's work may be characterized as an ongoing inward excavation of the damp recesses of the mind. He paints easel-sized "portraits" with a satisfying jumped-up oiliness. The integrity of his portrait heads are constantly being undermined, however, by the blob-like interpenetration of bright ground colors. The effect is something like the push and pull tension of Thomas Nozkowski struggling with the "the Thing" from the Fantastic Four. Brainard is afflicted with the condition of what may be termed "paint joy," which is good to see.

In certain works, such as *Sparks*, Brainard's concatenation of kitsch and the cosmic vibrates in a truly unsettling way. Knowing eyes stare out at you through safety glasses, while brightly colored camouflage patterns swirl in and over the background, head and nose. The painting becomes a mask for the painted. The black night sky background, which in other paintings functions more as a "far out" decorative swatch, here charges the painting, establishing an ambiguous cosmic stake for the weird confrontation with the staring eyes. These are paintings which establish limits, show you their terms, and direct you inward—into the surface, into the forms, into the mind.

Leave it Long in Back recalls the half-length morality tales of Baroque painting, with a mullet-wearing Brainard in the middle, and at his right a Carnival masked father figure in the midst of frightening hilarity. There is an unnerving dynamic between an elbowing pop culture reference and the possible flash of psychic revelation. Brainard's work appears to be in a fecund state of evolution; it will be interesting to see how he organizes his array of painterly ideas in the future.

In the foyer hangs a medium-size horizontal painting by Ryan Steadman of a suburban Sisyphus pushing a lawnmower up an inclined plane. The painting's scale is cinematic, but the reduction retards viewing in depth. Instead, Steadman has flattened the Sisyphus myth into a duochromed color field with the rectangle bisected diagonally. It appears that this is Steadman's mission: to create finely calibrated paintings that balance pictorial rigor with pop dumbness, blank seriousness with goofy humor. The painter John Wesley attempts something similar, but whereas Wesley embraces the mediation of pop, Steadman limits himself to an ambivalent handshake.

Each of Ryan Steadman's paintings contains a cartooned narrative fragment (a lawnmowing homeowner, a man leaping for an overthrown baseball, two cheerleaders battling) which resemble New Yorker marginalia drawings, and serve as painterly pretexts. In each work, the ground colors are applied in severe enamel stripes of milky uniformity, reminiscent of kids-room wallpaper, which contrasts with the globbed and pastried articulation he employs for his actors. The pictorial languages do not merge, however, resulting in an awareness of equipoised artificiality.

It appears that Steadman would rather chart the polar limits of expressivity than express himself. High ambition yields to aggressively lowered expectations. The elements of abstraction and expression are there, but the underlying faith which informs such practices has been purposefully hollowed out. The result is a kind of "skeptical painting," which probes for the limit conditions of what can be said in painting. Steadman's work is best when the element of humor displaces the imposed formal stasis, as in a painting which features a player in a baseball cap leaping for a hopelessly overthrown ball. Upon closer examination, one realizes from the trajectory of the ball that it is not simply overthrown, but is being launched into an earthly orbit. The absurdity and bathos of Steadman's situations lightens an otherwise heavy atmosphere, and enables Steadman to continue painting in an age of doubt.

—John Hawke

THE BROOKLYN FRONT EARLY SUMMER 2002