

DEAD BEARS AND DESIGNER SACKS

Review of Claire Brassil by Sasha Tochilovsky

This is a 72 x 48 in. painting; oil, acrylic and gouache on panel.

Just off the center of the painting is the central image; a very large tree with a modern tree house perched at the base of the branches. The tree stands on a flat clearing in a forest, ropes of various bright colors are strewn about. A small, blue kiddie pool can be visible behind the tree, out which a bright, striped “slip and slide” mat is stretched out on the grass. A green hose also has its start in the pool, and ends on the other “slip and slide” mat; this one a bright yellow in color. To the left and to the right of the tree, on the ground sit various stuffed sacks; either white or made out of modern designer prints. There are three more stuffed sacks hanging from the branches on the left side. To the right of the house, suspended from the branch hang two dead black bears. One is hung by its feet, the other by its neck and the rope is attached to a stake in the ground. All the white sacks, except for two, have, what appears to be, blood seeping through the fabric. The background is fairly shallow and is defined by the ground line just above the visual vertical half of the painting. The overall feel of the background is almost an abstracted camouflage pattern.

So what do have here? A lot. Let’s see if I can sort it all out. Many different thoughts come to mind while looking at this painting. For me, most of the initial thoughts revolve around trying to sting together the various elements to comprehend what is happening. It is obviously a scene of something that is happening or has already happened. To say that I am surprised at what I see would be an understatement. The scene is odd and refuses to give away too many of its secrets. It holds me captive and frustrates me as I try to reason with it. Is this some seriously twisted camp site? Is this some post-apocalyptic dwelling? To me it begins to speak of violence, of evidence. I try to piece the evidence into some coherent structure; to understand what had happened here. As I indulge in the piece I come up with different scenarios. Perhaps this is about a family, with a certain affectation for modernist design and architecture, (the Marimekko patterns speak loudly to that), which decides to escape the pressures of a ‘modern city’ for the comforts of the ‘forest’. In the forest they indulge in bear hunting and water slides. But why the sacks full of bloody ‘meat’? And what is under the brown sheet on the right side? And what is up with the magenta colored piece of cloth on the right? Why is one bear hanging by its feet the other by its neck? Maybe this is a site of some strange spiritual retreat; one where you try to reconnect with the primitive caveman inside us? You know sort of like *Outward Bound*, where you have to learn to go without

wearing deodorant for a week. But then what do the water slides have to do with it? So what to make of all this? All this just highlights the evidence itself; the objects, and how incongruous they seem to be. This is almost like a diorama from an underfunded natural history museum, with a painted back wall to simulate 'the forest'. This leads me to think of theatricality; of staging. I also think of the theme of staged evidence employed by many post-modern artists, where use of evidence, whether real or fabricated, creates a doubling of the meaning of many of the objects employed. Ralph Rugoff in his essay "More than Meets the Eye" writes, "the bloody baseball bat is at once a commonplace object and an uncanny incarnation of evil".¹ In the context of this painting this duality is achieved by the 'modern' artifacts; the fabrics and the style of architecture. In this case however, I think the roles of the objects is subverted. You would not ordinarily think of these modern objects as capable of being used for sinister purposes, such as perhaps a baseball bat might be. What comes across strongly in this painting, is the feeling of staging. Perhaps that is because the threads of evidence lead me to dead-ends. I can't piece together this puzzle, and I resign to the fact that it might be one of its intentions. Or perhaps I just may not make a very good detective. I also think that the painting method, as opposed to photography, allows for the 'unreality', or more precisely of an 'odd reality' to be accentuated and for the theatricality, to be thus stressed.

The work that comes to mind as part of a contextual framework is mainly Ed Ruscha's painting "Los Angeles County Museum on Fire" and also Jeff Wall's photographs. The evidence or the aftermath of an event is what makes me think of those pieces. The somewhat soft painting technique is reminiscent of Gerhart Richter, at the same time the tree themes remind me a little of Laura Owens' work. I also think of Peter Doig's somewhat flat, still landscapes as being close in context.

On an overall level I quite enjoy this painting, there are enough leads that keep me engaged with it. I come up with a lot of questions, which I enjoy trying to answer. It feels like a game, which also seems to be one of the paintings themes. The form and technique are clear, strong and quite pleasing. I do however feel that some things might need to get a bit tighter. The humorous qualities, even if they are a bit on the macabre side, come across, but perhaps make a potentially strong commentary easier to miss, or to dismiss. The overarching question though remains for me; what do all the pieces put together mean? Is this just an imaginary space that tries to stump the viewer? Does this relate to the artist's own personal history? I'm not sure yet, but I enjoy thinking about them, asking myself these questions.

TEXT & VISUAL REFERENCES

1. Ralph Rugoff, "More than Meets the Eye" in *Scene of the Crime* (MIT Press, 1997) p. 81



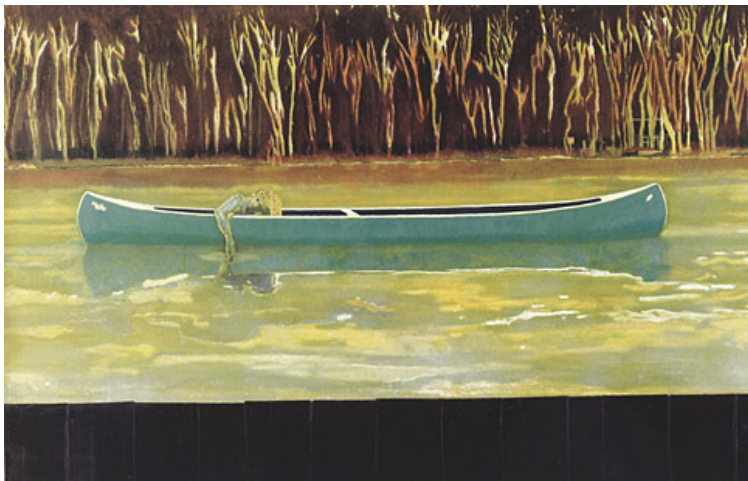
Ed Ruscha



Jeff Wall



Laura Owens



Peter Doig