

Jimmy Baker: New Paintings 2003

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Prompted by recent events in American history and eclectic personal interests in graphic design, spirituality, art history, punk rock, cartoons, social responsibility, digital imagery, and cultural theorists including Slavoj Zizek, Baudrillard, Noam Chomsky, and Dave Hickey, James Baker's new paintings exemplify the contemporary "coming of age" experience in our information over-loaded, visually saturated culture. What's refreshing about Baker's work is a serious attempt to make some sort of sense out of what he describes as the "spectacle of entertainment and destruction" in today's America. Working in oils and acrylics, often collaged with diverse media ranging from contact paper and digital stills to synthetic pigskin, epoxy resin, four-color transparencies, and metal T-pins, Baker composes visually compelling and intricately designed canvases that embody a personal urgency to reposition contemporary painting along historical, and art historical lines. Exploiting the textures, densities, and random variations of his multiple sources, Baker's complex and highly contextualized paintings are both theatrical and thoughtful. If indebted to similar schemes of art style appropriation among 1980s Neo-Expressionists painters like Julian Schnabel and David Salle, Baker's work—to his credit—is oriented more to issues of accountability and narrative.

To fans of 1980s culture, both high and low, the large oil Master of Puppets (2003, 60 x 84") is packed with suggestive details. The painting features a grotesque skeletal puppet-master (an image derived from the cover of the classic 1982 album "The Number of the Beast" by the British

heavy-metal band Iron Maiden), who is seen manipulating a set of strings attached to a still from Basquiat, a 1996 film (directed by Schnabel) which brilliantly captured the pointless addictions and nasty schisms of New York's 1980s art scene. Baker illustrates the scene in the movie where Pop diva Andy Warhol (played by rock diva David Bowie) encourages his studio assistant to urinate on a large copper plate (thereby re-inventing the tools and means of contemporary painting?), while the young painter Jean-Michel Basquiat leans against a desk in the background, watching and learning. Closer inspection reveals that the angry, bloodshot eyes of the puppet-master are miniature self-portraits of Baker himself, shown holding a paintbrush in the pose of the traditional artiste. Scrutinizing the cultural icons of his youth, and raising questions about the authorship—and ownership—of imagery, Baker reconsiders the meaning of painting, and the role of the artist, in a contemporary climate bombarded with visual sources, contested information, and general disinterest in synthesis and reflection.

Paintings such as Soothing Camouflage, for example, which features bright, swirling camo, floral, and faux-wood designs layered over a stark Internet image of the al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Sudan, bombed by the US in 1998 as a suspected chemical warfare lab (never proven) in retaliation for terrorist attacks on various American embassies in Africa, and I Apologize for My Personal Ignorance, which similarly juxtaposes seductive layers of paint with maps of the UK and Ireland, schematic drawings of suburban homes, the talons of an American bald eagle, and the word “pie,” speak to Baker's recognition of the broader social realities of imagery and modes of representation. Dazzling displays of animated, intensely chromatic brushwork and carefully orchestrated patterning, Baker's paintings are also, a la Hans Haacke, conceptually and politically charged.

Yet, if especially interested in shaping and directing viewer response to his visual narratives, Baker also realizes the practical impossibility that any artist can completely control his or her audience. Drawing on select examples of nineteenth-century American art, Baker's most recent work considers how nostalgia, ideology, and the cultural marketplace actually shape and direct aesthetic meaning. My Eyes Aren't Good Enough to See Its Origin, which merges a psychedelic paint-by-number version of Winslow Homer's Snap the Whip (1872) with the collaged image of a screaming eagle made from a football, and Four Paintings from Design Within Reach for Thomas Cole, small oils which blend details from Cole's The Voyage of Life series (1840) with images of high-end modernist furniture from the San Francisco based interior design company Design Within Reach, consider how artistic narratives are deflated or replaced over time. Homer's paean to public education has become the spectacle of professional sports, while Cole's moralizing allegories about the transcendental American landscape and the course of cultural democracy have been replaced by the seemingly spiritual appeal of affordable and well-designed office desks, platform beds, dining room tables, and sectional sofas. Like all of the work in this engaging exhibition, Baker's highly accomplished paintings attempt to reconcile his position, his voice, within the visual bombardment and multiple identities of contemporary America.