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Review RECENSITUS

Jimmy Baker: Remote Viewing

Jimmy Baker makes difficult art, and makes it extremely well. His solo show at Contemporary Arts Center, *Remote Viewing*, is only ten paintings but they are quite enough for the long, thin gallery that stretches along the south side of the CAC's second floor. The works hang at a distance from one another, as they should. Any closer would invite visual chaos.

Controlled chaos is going on in every painting. The thing to note is how well Baker exercises that control. He took the show's moderately inscrutable title from the movie *Men Who Stare At Goats*, a film about the U.S. military's unlikely exploration, in the late 20th century, of paranormal sensory responses. Do not be misled. While our war-struck times and the situations they engender infuse this subject matter, I think they are for Baker



Baker, Jimmy. Storm Troupe, 2010. Oil and UV Ink on Canvas over panel, 48x36in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

something like what squares were for Josef Albers, who famously said the square was the dish in which he served his "craziness for color." Baker is serving up his thoughts on painting, in works that date from this year and late 2010.

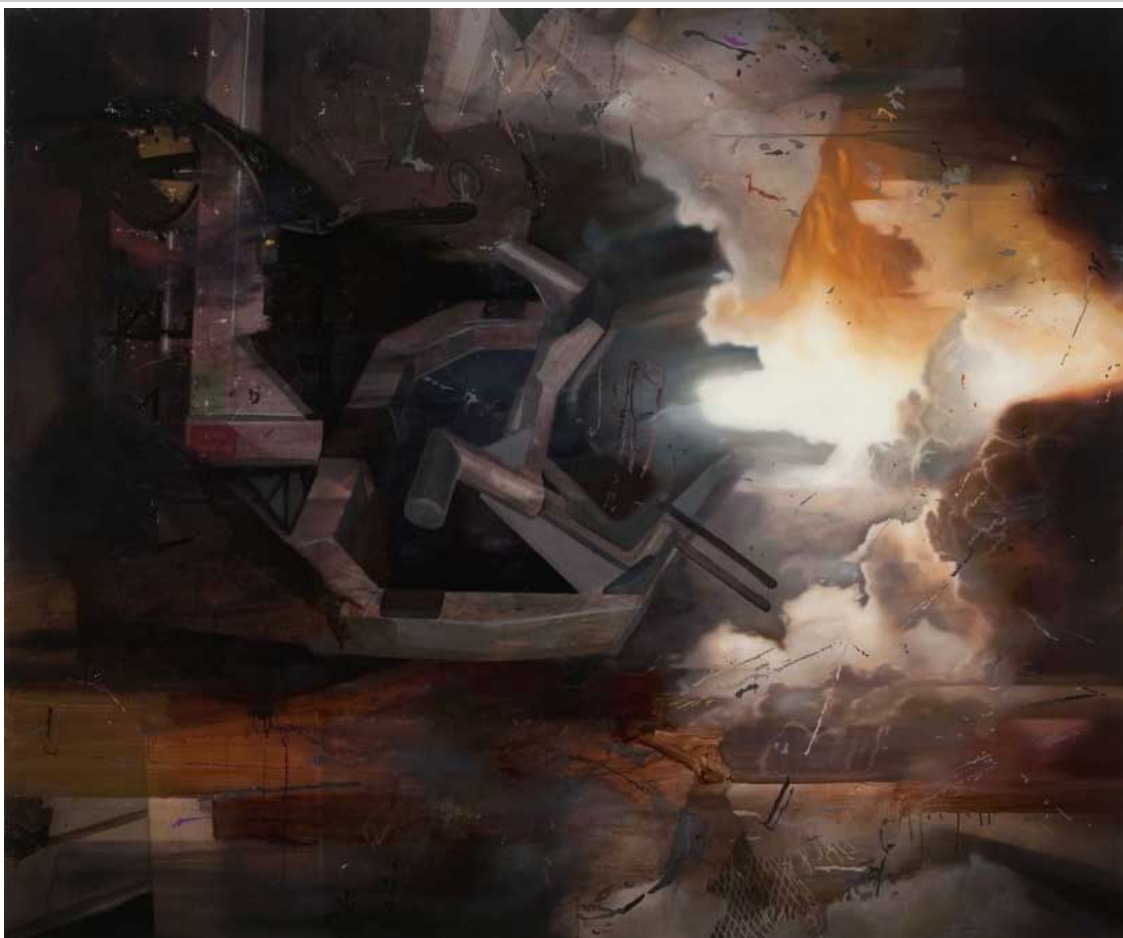
Only marginally into his 30s, the young artist grew up in Dover, Ohio, received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Columbus College of Art and Design in 2002 and a Master's of Fine Art from the University of Cincinnati's College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning in 2004. He's currently an adjunct instructor at the Art Academy of Cincinnati and lives in the city's Northside neighborhood with his architect wife in a house they jointly rehabbed. In the few



years since graduation success has come quickly. He's been in shows on both coasts and significant points (Chicago, Philadelphia) between. The CAC exhibition, flatteringly in conjunction with *Keith Haring: 1978-1982*, is his first solo museum appearance. He sells internationally.

Shallow steps, only a few really, lead down to this gallery and give some viewers—this one, anyway—an unsettled feeling going in. Hand rails are at either end, out of reach unless you hug the wall, but the unsettling often is to the art's advantage. True here.

Pareidolia is directly ahead. We see a small boat, prow intact but stern gone, and a cataclysm suggested. Large metal arms are detached from their unseen source, their original purpose uncertain. Like all the paintings here, this work includes found images scavenged from digital media and printed across the entire surface of the canvas. Traditional oil painting techniques are brought into play, altering the printed images, producing hints and references to both painting and popular culture in dense compositions that fill the picture plane. Each whole is sealed off with a bright, slick surface.



Baker, Jimmy. *Pareidolia*, 2011. Oil and UV Ink on Canvas, 70x84in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

It should be said that Baker has ascribed his titles, some of which will send you to the dictionary, to research he's carried out on the project mentioned above, the U.S. military's excursion into psychic methods of "seeing" objects not in view. *Pareidolia*, for instance, refers to interpreting some slight stimulus as an actual entity.

Easier to decipher, as a title, is *Storm Troupe*, hanging alone on the end wall at right as you enter. Clouds appear to be descending on a landscape but darkness of impenetrable strength hovers above, sometimes in straight-line strokes. In the midst of the darkness a small space picked out in bright-ish colors suggests a closet or perhaps a bookcase.

Both these works are dark and disturbing, so with something like relief one comes to *Snow Leopard*, alight with living green, only to note that branches are severed and what might be a building is twisted. A Snow Leopard can be the endangered species or the Apple operating system of that name, or perhaps both.

Baker is a trickster, luring you into *Hamd Bags* with a suggestion, somehow, that he's set out to do a pretty little vase of flowers, or so it struck me, but then we see the colors are only on the edge of being pretty and that material which might be burning is tumbling into an unzipped, unoccupied, inconspicuous pair of jeans at bottom of the composition.

The challenging space at the far end of this gallery, where the ceiling suddenly goes up an extra story and the game changes, is met by the largest work here, *Divination*, holding its own with no strain. Machines of one sort and another are portrayed, doing the work of divining, one supposes, set off by vertical shots of electric blue. It's an alive canvas; it needs that space above.



Baker, Jimmy. *Kunar Eclipse*, 2011. Oil and UV Ink on Canvas over panel, 46x70in. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Dominating the remaining wall is *Kunar Eclipse*, a piece of word play that escapes me, in which a woman's face is suggested rather strongly, the lashes of one closed eye thick and glamorous but where the other eye would be a tangle of strokes suggests a socket.

The term "mashup," originating with the web to define combinations of material from separate sources but so soon adopted in general conversation as to go from trendy to cliché in about the time it takes a Twitter post to circulate, reverts to its original meaning applied to

Baker's work. That's exactly what he does, with digital images printed in UV ink and coupled with hand-painted additions in oil. He's telling us something about where painting is now, and he also asks where it's going. You can substitute "society" for "painting" and have something else to think about, as Baker no doubt does too, but I think he's front and center occupied with thoughts on painting.

The final work, as the visitor turns to follow the slanting walk up to the rest of the second floor, is *Korengal OBE*. At first glance it's as straightforward as anything here, but straightforward in Baker's hands is a ploy. Colors include spring greens and oranges, a looming structure is at left and in the upper center a slanted shadow dominates the work. You might find yourself thinking "It's a bird, it's a plane. . ." but you can be pretty sure it isn't Superman.

- **Jane Durrell**

Jimmy Baker: Remote Viewing at the **Contemporary Arts Center**: Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, 44 E. 6th Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202. 513.345.8400. Through April 10, 2011.



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