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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



Keith Mayerson, *Vertigo*, 2002, oil on linen, 32 x 42".

KEITH MAYERSON

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

Keith Mayerson's painting cycle "Hamlet 1999," 2001–2004, is nothing less than an attempt to synthesize received images of high art, popular entertainment, and American history into a chronicle of an alternative, potentially revolutionary masculinity. It looks, however, like the product of a guy who paints in a converted garage, watching DVDs with one eye,

the news with the other, and an art-history textbook with an enlightened third.

The plotless "narrative" of more than one hundred canvases, rendered in a palette of marigold and pea soup, has only a general order, accumulating meaning frame by frame like an exploded comic book. Its tragic drift is bookended by a pair of GWs: Bush, recognizably smug even in a few blotches of oil paint, and Washington, à la Gilbert Stuart but mortally disappointed. The latter's a Ghost, and the former's an arch-Claudius; but the figures that recur—among them Keanu Reeves, River Phoenix, Harry Potter, John Lennon, and the Virgin Mary—are less characters than mobile principles of martyrdom, sorrow, venality, and legacy extracted by the artist from Shakespeare's play and clad in contemporary skins.

Transformation and substitution are the keys to this realm, extending to Mayerson's facture. References unite figures as diverse as da Vinci and de Kooning; his paint handling varies from the thin to the encrusted, with images left suggestively inchoate or wrenched away from their sources. Canvases at times seem stalled in the process of becoming. Mayerson takes up painting's historical opposition between immanence and image because he craves its supposed access to transcendence. Hence representation's occasional interruption by abstract paintings, dubbed "iconsapes" by the artist; hence the flying saucer, the cyborg gorilla, and the images from 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (science fiction being a perfect container for anxieties about transformation, technological or otherwise).

Standing in the midst of the polyphony of skulls, Jesuses, aliens, and pop idols in "Hamlet 1999" was pulse raising and a little disorientating, and made clear

Mayerson's goal of evoking the unconscious. The paintings filled Derek Eller's modest gallery from baseboard to fire sprinkler. On each wall, a few large easel works anchored groupings of small- and medium-size ones, effectively establishing a tempo. But individual images in "Hamlet 1999" usually offer little incident, and motion coagulates in Mayerson's tactile strokes. In an emblematic image taken from a comic-book cover, Superman hefting a car has stiffened into a downcast prance, and the famous imprint's name has been changed from *Action Comics* to *Act On Comics*. Causality erupted only once in the installation, dead in the middle, to assert a climax in three stacked paintings. From the top: Spiderman, stricken, on the roof of a building against a blue-black sky; Jimmy Stewart dangling from the gutter in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, face distorted into a Munch-like rotten potato; a blue King Kong lying dead and monumental at the foot of the World Trade Center.

Mayerson achieved early success a decade ago with the funny, romantic, political series "Pinocchio the Big Fag," 1993; as befits the times, his new work is less sociable. "Hamlet 1999" may recall German and American "bad" painting of the last thirty years, but in sensibility Mayerson is much closer to Philip Guston or Raymond Pettibon: affect yes, attitude no. With a warped, expressive style and a fevered network of connections among idols and villains—as well as the fact of Mayerson's recent low profile, this being his first solo outing in seven years—the artist plays at being a crackpot. But like the original, this Hamlet only feigns madness; unlike the Dane, there's no hand-wringing about engaging his inheritances.

—Domenick Ammirati