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Inka Essenhigh A New Grammar of Motion

David Hunt

We've been fetishizing speed for so long, it's no wonder that velocity has become a style. The collage aesthetic in 80s painting, so often likened to an amped up particle accelerator, has finally become literalized in recent work exploring collision, combustion, oscillation, and orbiting. Techno-organic metaphors are in such large supply these days and have so assimilated themselves into common parlance that it's no longer enough to accurately describe the content of a painting. We want to know what that content is doing; we want verbs. Inka Essenhigh's fluid enamel paintings are the perfect beta-test for this new grammar of motion. Critics go deep when raiding the pop-culture vault to describe Essenhigh's content. Various said to house "polymorphic droids," "prefab toy systems" and "industrial appliances" on a surface that's been called "squeaky clean," "patent leather," and akin to "Chinese lacquerware." Influences seem to cascade and overflow in the same manner as her hovering biomorphic forms. Bacon, Dali, and Tanguy get namechecked, while Japanimation and Ukiyo-e are typically trotted out as fundamental motifs. No doubt these themes may be percolating in the back of Essenhigh's mind, but only after speaking with the artist does one realize the degree and depth of her assimilation, the unconscious distancing from her predecessors.

David Hunt: what is the importance of the line in your paintings. How does that establish motion and flux even when your "objects" seem to float in a steady-state?

Inka Essenhigh: I begin with the line. Say I'm drawing a person walking. I might start off drawing the whole figure, or perhaps just the legs. Out of his head or heart I'll draw a line indicating the direction he's going. If it's developing into a "pleasing composition" I might draw a more faded line to indicate



where he's been. If his movement is jerky his path might create a jagged pattern. All of these patterns and action lines are outlined. They become just as solid as the actual contours of the person, but by suggesting motion the lines depict the past, present, or the desire of the person to get somewhere — a suggested future stance, posture, or location rendered statically. I'm simply using the language of cartoons; just aestheticizing it into an abstracted event. The line allows me to switch back and forth between picture and symbol.

DH: It seems like the characters are wearing uniforms or have adopted a particular style of dress.

IE: I use people in uniforms because I like to play with the idea that two soldiers are standing next to each other, or again, like the line, to suggest the same soldier at a different point in time. Often I have a lot of "repeats," either a motif, a single character, or set of things that appear several times throughout the canvas; always in a different configuration. How this arrangement evolves

is what the “narrative” is about. For example: you may have two cheerleaders, the one on the right is more excited than the one on the left or becoming more excited. That’s the “narrative.” It’s like a light play on Cubism or Futurism. Like Boccioni’s Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, only instead of simply capturing motion instantaneously, I attempt to convey multisequential emotions and moods. It started when I was designing men’s boxer shorts. I noticed that one golf club pattern showed a figure madly trying to swing at a ball forever. It was like a parody of frustration played out over time.

DH: The central event in your paintings often appears like an engine of dispersion; as if some core machine has malfunctioned and is spinning off parts that then drift through their own inertia.

IE: Well it’s not always like that. The general movement in any of my compositions is a physical representation of my own energy or a story. The ratio of grand sweeping things to little balled up things is based on how I feel that day or month. Sometimes it’s comic; a large movement having a small effect. Picture Bugs Bunny sneaking up on something: ominous, operatic music alternating with low, murmuring tip toe music. Once when I was a kid my sister threw a Luke Skywalker doll at me. She happened to throw it so the doll traveled in a perfect horizontal path towards me. Flying through the air, the doll appeared static and godlike, frozen as if in a single animated cell. This is the sort of language I play with: formal, like Bauhaus or Baroque design formulas.

DH: Is there a unifying thread to this movement?

IE: The essence I’m most interested in is the group emotion; a single event that ties people together such as patriotism, religion, or war. The main event or historical cataclysm that you assume will galvanize everyone, but of course always leaves some lingering strays. I try to capture this general feeling as well as its disenfranchised byproducts.

DH: The characters in the paintings often seem to be wrestling with their own deformity or grappling with some kind of industrial appliance. Is there some kind of epic struggle or battle going on here? Are the figures imprisoned by the cords, wires, and harnesses that surround them?

IE: I don’t exactly think of machines as much as I think about the way people or things function. Because the compositions encompass a beginning, middle and end of something, it may be an epic story or something trivial. For instance, the background or stage is always generic, and the action seems superimposed on this neutral surface. The harnesses and wires sometimes indicate a connection between a thing happening and the location where it’s happening, almost like a coordinate system. I think of this generic quality of space as being particularly American. Vast wide-open heartlands or frontiers barely changing as you speed through them — only interrupted by an occasional sign dopplering by. It gives you a uniform sense of scale and proportion like a shoddy modernist housing complex, corporate multiplex, or edge city.

DH: This sounds like a suburban nightmare you’re just now waking from.

IE: Well, I once had a job gold leafing the outside of Victoria’s Secret stores. They have one in almost every mall in America. For a couple of weeks at a time I would fly into some mall in Ft. Lauderdale or Indianapolis and work 18 hour days. No matter what city or state, I slept in virtually the same hotel room and worked in the same cookie cutter store, recreating the same prefab, gold-leaf designs. During breaks I would go shopping. If I bought something in Florida on Monday I could return it in Indiana on Tuesday. Space seemed to fold into a generic 3D map.

DH: I noticed that none of the humanoid forms have heads. Is that a conscious deformation?

IE: I don’t paint the faces because the language of cartooning is so readable, it



adds unnecessary baggage and takes away from the interchangeability of things. Especially cartoon faces; they become like a tattoo revealing all kinds of sociological information like class or education, forcing the viewer into a too literal reading or a kind of political judgement.

DH: Viewers seem intent on unscrambling or decoding a narrative in your work. It's as if you've created this hermetic world and now they want the creation myth.

IE: This may be true in the sense that messy paint is often equated with raw emotion and polished paint with being emotionally distant or cerebral. Because I have an orderly, polished surface people expect a tidy little story without any emotional aura. But I don't really subscribe to that simple dichotomy. Is Ingres any less emotional than Hans Hoffman? I try not to presume or anticipate what the art world wants in terms of narrative. I make decisions about what goes in or what comes out based on what will look good, not on fashionable subject matter. Sometimes I have themes; if I had a pure white canvas I might say to myself, "It's a snow painting."

DH: You mentioned color as a building block. How does this tie in with the mood of the objects.

IE: I start a canvas off with a color on it. I mix a color that might suggest other colors or a mood; sunlight or an ocean scene. For an ocean scene I might use gray for the sky or a blue for the water. Colors change as I make the painting and introduce basic shapes. At this point in the process, color and shapes play an almost equal and interchangeable role in determining mood and scene. A round blue object on a black background is shorthand for the earth in space. Follow with white spots and they instantly become stars, etc. Alex Katz also plays with this notion of minimal shapes to create basic scenes: a white triangle on a blue background becomes a sailboat in Maine waters on a sunny afternoon. My interests are less naturalistic than Katz. I'll use something very tangible and industrial like a plastic traffic cone as a poetic device or metaphor to suggest the infinite plasticity of our environment.

David Hunt is a critic based in New York.

Inka Essenhigh was born in Belfonte, Pennsylvania in 1969. She lives and works in New York.

Selected solo shows: 1997: La Mama, New York; 1998: Stefan Stux, New York; 1999: Deitch Projects, New York; New Room of Contemporary Art, Albright Knox, Buffalo (NY); 2000: Mary Boone, New York; Victoria Miro, London.

Selected group shows: 1998: "Pop Surrealism," The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT; "Blade Runner," Caren Golden Fine Art, New York; 1999: "Pleasure Dome," Jessica Fredericks, New York; 2000: "Greater New York," P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York.