

BETWEEN BEAUTY AND REPULSION

The collaborative paintings of Alexandra Haeseker and John Hall have been an ongoing dialogue over the past decade. While both artists have kept their individual identities with solo exhibitions in other parts of the world, they return to the non-verbal conversation of handing partially finished paintings back and forth to complete, as a way of opening up new possibilities in image realization. Both have been residents in central colonial Mexico for years, and their backgrounds as Canadian artists have given them an outside/ inside perspective that comes with the foreigner's gaze.

To begin with, they gathered subject matter which is so readily available that it is almost invisible, as everyday artifacts from the street markets of San Miguel de Allende: cheap plastic toys, domestic tin objects, various masks, hardware items, religious mementos, comic books, and the like. The colored plastic bags and wrappers that each individual prop was contained in, as part of the market transaction, were also treated with similar reverence as included subject matter.

In organizing the plethora of found things that was to be a view of Mexican cultural identity as humble triggering devices, they also chose to bury their own portraits metaphorically within the picture plane along with everything else. The structural organization of beautiful disarray allowed many possible narratives to emerge. Barbie dolls in transparent body bags are like frozen moments; masked wrestler-heros fight mythic battles with mammoth rubber insect effigies; paper-mache rattles from the Locos parade threaten; tin hearts might bleed; Jell-O accidents spill; crosses wave on chains and the artists' faces suffocate under those plastic bags (even though the printed warnings always tell you to watch out for that possibility). Danger and rescue are present in these works at every turn. Masks made of plastic, wood, or paper (representative of so many cross-sections out of historical and contemporary Mexican lore), are held up as thin disguises by each of the collaborator's hands.

I find it rather intriguing that the artists engulf themselves in the cultural debris of subject matter and its ensuing chaos; and position themselves as observers behind masks? Perhaps the glimpses one sees, as a foreigner, must always be from this slightly removed location. Some might say that the very act of this ex-patriot positioning, between innocence and experience, creates the clearest interpretation to embrace the unknown. The viewer must work through these images, like a reporter, paramedic or archaeologist; weighing the damage and picking through the rubble to see what can be saved. The difficult interval between beauty and repulsion has dissolved in the paint handling and the subjective read of Hall and Haeseker's nightmarish imagery. But, there is both terror and humor to be found here too, depending how one engages in viewing the themes presented under the cloak of the clutter of still-life painting.

Another way of looking at these bizarre works would be to reverse the direction of the structural read...to be not so much about burying one's self under the collision of layers of rendered plastic; but, instead, to see it as uncovering one's eyes in an attempt to surface and truly see one's surroundings. It is like shedding one's skin. This seduction of visceral vulnerability has its roots in the eroticism of what the painted materials look like. The reflective surfaces and translucent properties of the glazed bags (which flow like precious liquids in and out of the pictures), also have the tactile reprehensibility of tissues or membranes. The birthing references are found between the violent flood of color and surfaces, shiny and wet, and the breaking through of heads from torn paper and taut plastic, flesh and blood...the history of Mexico itself.

In the end, the Haeseker/Hall dialogues rest in the very place in which they first began. That is; two views that look from both sides of a place that is shrouded in wonderful mystery. Their paintings keep the mystery unanswered, for to name it, would be its undoing.

Marijke de Wit



John Hall & Alexandra Haeseker with their painting “TABLE MANNERS”