

JAMES ESBER: AMERICAN DELIRIUM

SOUTHEAST CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART
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by David Brown

Delighting in the journey towards abstraction, James Esber masterfully disrupts and manipulates images culled from the highs and lows of Americanized globe-trotting culture that, under the artist's direction, becomes dissected, squeezed, and collaged into new forms and forced meanings. In some of his works, Esber constructs fleshy, voluptuous objects using plasticine—a putty-like substance available in a variety of colors, broken off in bits, rolled and pushed with his fingers into the wall (or on canvases)—to render an array of unsettling hybrid/combo images and seductive textures. Never before has sculpture looked so flat or has painting felt so dimensional. In other works, Esber pushes graphite, paint, ink and watercolor around flat surfaces, some cut out and forced back together, in ways that recalls the work of Chicago's legendary Hairy Who, the painter Peter Saul, and tricked-out 60's psychedelia. Through his doodling line, mark-making material, and physical technique, Esber, almost an alchemist by nature, turns rigid forms into squished liquidity. Despite this bending of line and structure, distorted color and mismatched images, we can navigate the resulting work with little effort. Tricky Dick, Osama Bin Laden, Michael Jackson, and even Abe Lincoln dutifully receive Esber's makeover without so much as altering our memories of these singular icons. Perhaps through Esber's deft hand, these images appear a little more human, possibly more vulnerable. These forms are so imbedded in our brains that despite these playful graphic exaggerations to the original form, we have little trouble in connecting the dots and recognizing the image.

Hummel figurines, prizefighters, peeping toms, cavorting couples, smashed up automobiles--Esber bombards us with his collision of iconic American winners/losers, heroes/villains, and low-brow kitsch, resulting in a rollicking send-up of images. Within his presentation of image bending, we can either rejoice and join the visual party or surrender to some queasy feeling as witness to the jumbled proceedings. According to noted curator and writer Robert Storr, "Esber's work may be an acquired taste—or for those who begin with 'taste' in its conventional sense—an acquired tastelessness, but it is unapologetically rich in its own flavors and full of the surprises that attend not the marriage of reason and squalor but the well-plotted misalliance of fancy and funk."

This fancy and funky exhibition represents the artist's first one-person museum exhibition and, as is consistent with the history of this organization, SECCA is pleased to be the first museum in the United States to celebrate a large-scale survey of his work.