

In describing the social realities of a city like New York, the political catch-phrase switched in the last decade from Melting Pot to Glorious Mosaic. The new term implies that adjacent identities no longer liquefy and blend together, but rather maintain their own while being part of a larger whole. Looking at James Esber's recent paintings I was reminded of that phrase, as Esber atomizes recognizable essences from pure, rigorous, abstract painting to political cartooning. He rudely pushes them together to create the larger composition, but yet lets each fragment preternaturally evoke its source and history, in that bizarre way that shattered holographic photo shards contain complete pictures.

James Esber, like many of his contemporaries, no longer worries over the gap between abstraction and representation and freely combines appropriated distorted images, optically patterned cloth and pure paint. Fragments are literally cut apart and stitched back together, giving the juxtapositions a physical, not just metaphorical punch. Sometimes the paintings are stuffed like cushions, their swollen bellies further hampering our ability to apprehend the images.

What would have seemed deliberate heresy a generation ago, combining modes of painting, has become the vernacular. As such these new hybrids have reabsorbed, in an altered form, traditional criteria for success and failure of a painted surface: balance, all-over composition, edge treatment, foreground/background issues and even hoary old push/pull. But these issues, once the pseudo-objective basis of mythic connoisseurship, have had to be recreated, since the standards of measure are no longer strictly in the realm of the retinal or the sensual.

As is clear in most recent discourse around abstract painting, the universe of potential real-world associations are no longer sealed off. They come rushing into our heads as soon as we, as viewers, receive the vaguest permission. So if a particular red is no longer just a visually highly stimulating color, but also evocative of lipstick-coated lips or fresh blood, its weight when measured in the balancing of a composition is changed, when

opposed to a less associative color. (I admit that it is almost impossible to think of a color with only neutral associations, once we have started down this free-associative path.)

Well, what happens when one of the elements to be balanced is a racist cartoon, or the indelible image of the moment before the execution of a Viet Cong? Can anything sit beside an anti-semitic cartoon of a Jewish spider seizing the world or a Red-Skin characterization of a Native American? What happens when the image is camouflaged? How distorted does it have to be for it not to be the only thing you see, remember, talk about? And what does that teach us about the ability of such images to replicate themselves even as they are being dismantled? Even Esber's other loaded but less controversial images, such as teddy bears and innocent cheesecake pin-ups, seem to exist in perpetuity and endless circulation in our collective image-banks.

An image of the face of a young black man seems particularly rich for examining the contradictions one gets into when one tries to determine the absolute meaning of an image. In the painting "Prison" 1995, this man stares threateningly, angrily out from behind bars. The image alone is ambiguous. What was its use in its previous real-world life? Was it illustrating an article on the high percentage of young black men in prison and what those numbers say about our societal failings? Perhaps he could be a martyred political prisoner, country unknown. Was it a Willie Horton-like scare-image designed to amorally play on white paranoia? Could it have been an image sprung from black culture, a gangsta rap album cover, playing off violent personae as a way of claiming power and authority the dominant culture is unwilling to share?

Esber slices, dices and stretches the image. It is painted in the over-size dots of mechanical reproduction, which makes it difficult to see from close up. From a foot away one is much more likely to be engaged by the dangling, slightly-comic phallic stockings, the vivid red and white stripes and the painting's oversize wham-pow punch. But once the image is apprehended the brain recalibrates; the balance of the painting shifts. The slicing of the surface reads as surgery, and the joining together reads as a form of suturing. The panty-hose pseudo-flesh-tones now become referential to racial tension in America, and the cheerful stripes function as surrogates for feel-good political rhetoric that ignores systemic problems.

Esber's challenge is how to deal with such materials and the double meaning of "deal with" is intended. Having decided to use these, he had to deal with them as visual elements, as well as psychologically. None of us, even the most evolved, is totally free from prejudiced and stereotypical thinking, even when those images are about oneself, one's group identification. Looking at them is painful and one wonders about the artist, spending long hours alone with them in the studio.

When balancing the stereotypical images, ranging from truly hateful to more benign, with Esber's other choices, such as the pin-up, teddy bear and Life magazine images of the Vietnam War era, one sees Esber's image choices as plays on memory. Why does an image reverberate around our collective cultural rememberings?

As the images are with varying degrees already known to the viewer, we must admit that they are already inside our heads. We have something to do with their preservation and distribution. We cannot feign unfamiliarity with this vocabulary.

The first Esber paintings I ever saw, long ago, employed images of extinct birds and animals. They were stylistically treated very differently, but the images were also pushed, pulled, cut and reassembled. Remembering these helps define Esber's larger project. Those animals were gone, therefore they continued to exist only as fleshless images; you could cut them, and they would not bleed, die or complain.

Perhaps it is wise to think of them when looking at these new paintings. These too are "only images", hurtful yes, but only to the degree that you choose to give them power, to believe that they have force in the world. By treating them as he does, inserting mountains of visual noise to (un)balance them, to destabilize them, to transform them into unpleasant background noise; they can therefore be drowned out, neutralized. One suspects that the artist, by problematizing our approach to these images, similarly tames them for himself.

Bill Arning - 1996