



JAMES ESBER — EXQUISITE CORPSE JUXTAPOZ, JUL/AUG, 2001

by Annie Tucker

We see two images and can't envision them on the same picture plane. James Esber sees them and paints them right on top of each other or, better yet, mixes them in plasticine right on a gallery wall. Annie Tucker picks his brain.

No one's life is as easy as Norman Rockwell would have you think. Kids today don't grow up watching the sunset and hanging out at the swimming hole; they grow up with drugs and guns and porn. Still, sex and Rockwell images seem completely in compatible, right? Not if you're James Esber.

Forging harmonious connections between incompatible visual and psychological connections—and making them sell—is what Esber does best. That is how it came to be, in his show last December at Soho's PPOW Fine Arts, that existing that existing Rockwell illustrations and pictures from Penthouse magazine and the Joy of Sex were spliced together jubilantly in the artist's own paintings, drawings, and contorted cartoonish plasticine sculptures all over the walls.

Esber himself is a mixed bag of influences. He grew up outside Cleveland, Ohio in the late 60's; the ongoing Viet Nam War was a distant reminder that there was danger and suffering somewhere in the world, but certainly not right where he was. So while Esber's assessment of Rockwell's work as a distortion of reality may be right on, his own youthful perception of American life didn't deviate entirely from the older artist's working model. Esber recalls, "I grew up in this suburban, working class neighborhood. When I was a kid I was interested in Rockwell because he was my idea of what a good artist was. I didn't know any better."

Esber stuck around the Midwest long enough to receive his BFA from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 1984 and then, like so many artists do, struck out for New York. Since 1986, he has lived in Williamsburg, Brooklyn with his wife, painter Jane Fine, predating the herds of artists and dot-com hipsters who have descended on the area recently for its industrial feel and comparatively inexpensive rents.

Whether it's a backlash against where he grew up or a reflection of where he lives now, that Esber's art would be anything but calm and ordinary seems a foregone conclusion. In fact, it looks a lot like the trailers you see when you're on acid. Esber seduces plasticine (albeit along a more strategic and evocative trajectory) the way a kid coaxes a piece of bubble gum absentmindedly into an amoeba with his fingers. His masterpieces in the medium (inspired by Keane figurines from the 70's) are mind-boggling arrangements of gooey hues and strategic thumbprints that he manipulates into heaps of free-form faces and bodies. The works transmit a devil-may-care vibe that belies the hours or careful planning and painstaking execution required to achieve the desired melee.

Rockwell, who came back to haunt Esber once his career in New York was underway, is an undeniable presence in Esber's plasticine work. "I had collected Rockwell images for years," Esber relates, "and couldn't figure out a way to do anything with them. And then as I got older and started to think about imagery in a different way, it became a challenge to try to use something so outside the fine-art realm in my own work."

Boy With Toy works with all the same technical principles as Boys' Club but is more emblematically Esber because it highlights the artist's predilection for resurrecting innocence and naughtiness. The subject of Boy With Toy (whose very title becomes delightfully perverse within the context of the piece) is technically a little boy wearing a three-cornered hat. But isn't it the almost laughably phallic dog snaking between his legs from various angles that really captures our attention?

Plasticine's physical and psychological malleability may provide an optimal forum for sexual content. But does something about the PPOW venue specifically bring out Esber's dirty side? How important is context in creating the plasticine pieces? "That's the problem I have with a lot of installation work," Esber says. "I don't know where to draw the line as far as the context for looking at the art goes. Is it the wall? The room? The building? The city? I'm interested mainly in how the image functions illusionistically and physically in the space of the room."

The plasticine medium was not without its shortcomings, however, particularly in regard to Esber's treatment of space. "The plasticine pieces aren't as spatially complex; there's not as much to explore," the artist explains. So he started painting, using as a creative springboard a game called "Exquisite Corpse" that the surrealists developed. The original participants folded a piece of paper into as many sections as there were players. The first player drew part of a body to the edge of one fold and then handed the paper over to another person who, without looking at the preceding design, contributed another body part to the next untouched section. After every player had taken a turn, they unfolded the paper to reveal the final product: the meeting of many individual styles in one full malformed body.

This is exactly how Esber's paintings turn out, except in his case, there's only one person doing the work. "My paintings have to do with how much space I can make within the confines of a figure, by creating separations between elements close to each other. The viewer has to piece the image back together; it's like they have to play a tape in reverse of what I did to make it." But the sleuthing process, rather than leading to a unified conclusion about Esber's intentions, undoubtedly only breeds more questions: why the need to unify that which cannot be unified? Why the schizophrenic breaks in color and technique? Don't ask Esber. All he'll say is, "there's nothing that I want people to see specifically. I think art is best when it doesn't tell you what to think but raises questions."

For the painting Rabbit Talk (a composition of alternating strips of Rockwell illustration and a soft-porn image), Esber comments, "I just love the way the stuff stacked up into this mass at the top and totally overwhelmed these really skinny ankles. When I had these two images separately I suspected they'd look great together. When I actually put them together I was right." Still you can ascertain only vaguely what's what from slice to slice, and even then it's only because Esber changes line styles compulsively within his work. "I'm really interested in the idea of tunnel vision in drawing, in focusing on a small area, completely finishing, and moving across the image," says Esber. "I'll do a little bit of a drawing, finish it, and pick it up a few days later. And each time I do I draw in a different style, depending on my mood. I'm particularly into doodle-like digressions."

Despite what appears to be a playful attitude toward art in general, Esber maintains that almost every image he produces has "personal emotional resonance for me or comes from things I was interested in growing up." But that's as much of a generalization as Esber will make about his artwork; if you ask him to affiliate himself with one formal movement, he won't do it. "it could go so many different ways," he explains. "I've been in shows about surrealism: I'm going to be in a show that involves anime imagery; I was in a show called Topologies; I was in a show about morphing. The way you categorize me just depends on which aspect of my work you focus on." Where do we begin?