

PROVINCETOWN

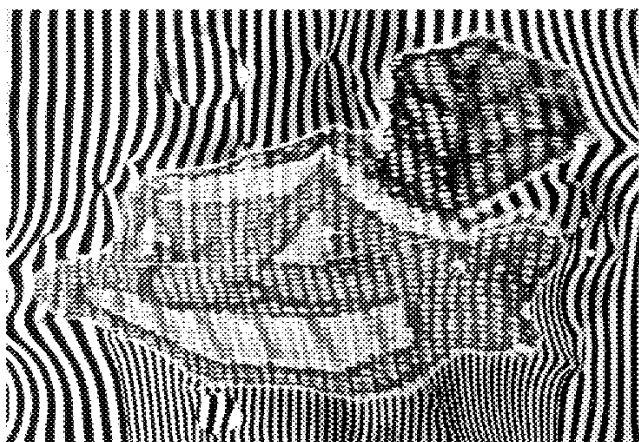
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JAMES ESBER, HATE IMAGE #3 (INDIAN), 1993

The *Hate Images* of James Esber

BY MARY BEHRENS

While depicting an array of vicious stereotypes, James Esber paints in response to a world of borrowed images, images which have been processed, recycled, and manipulated by a mass media so omnipresent that traces of the so-called natural world have all but vanished from sight. An artist whose mission has been to pump up the volume on culturally prefab imagery, Esber re-manufactures the often embarrassing signs of society's racist, sexist, kitsch-ist propaganda. In the 1960s Andy Warhol took on the task of reconfiguring the banal into objects and paintings which demanded a closer look at consumerism as a necessary focus of fine art. Warhol's work was meaningfully empty and its apolitical nature forced the issue of locating beauty in the static currency of Coke bottles, Campbell's soup cans, Brillo boxes, Elvis, Marilyn, Jackie, and Liz. Though his lineage from pop art is clear, Esber,

in his *Hate Images* series, begun in Provincetown while on a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center, is succinctly of the moment. Where Warhol took the neutered subject of a Coke bottle to reveal its worthy relationship to American culture, Esber borrows loaded stereotypes from which to deconstruct culture's troubling relationship with the distorted signs of a racist and sexist history and a society deeply confused by its own complicity.

Esber grew up in suburban Cleveland in the late '60s and was raised on *Life* magazine, television, and Swanson TV dinners. Like much of his generation, life-as-it-happens appeared for him via the remote-less television screen. The vitality that images contained, whether static or moving, left a lasting impression. Life revealed itself through the Benday dots of reproduced images or the pixelated break-down of the TV's mise-en-scene.

With the *Hate Images*, Esber creates a body of work intended to display the experience of the reproduced image, guided by the idea that stereotypes of Jews, African-Americans, women, Native Americans, and others depicted in the series, are first and foremost a distorted version of reality. What makes these paintings so powerful and beautiful is that Esber matches content with form so seamlessly and with such forcefulness that the idea becomes the work and vice versa. In a baroque manner, the images are magnified almost beyond recognition and the artifice of the paintings' surfaces is cranked up. In recent pieces, Esber even stretches and distorts the painting's support, the canvas itself becoming a spectacle of distended material, a further metonym for an image's distorted facts. Esber's work reflects a disquieting reproduction of culture's more vile legacy—blown-up images of fear, hatred, and contempt. ■