

It's Hard To Be Happy

The art of our epoch will be remembered for its singular focus on culture as its subject, objects of everyday life as its image base, and the struggles of a multicultural society to achieve social identity as its content. From the late 1980s on, the art world has emphasized the exploration of collective identity and social issues in response to the ever-increasing complexities of liberation politics and global economies that inundate daily life. Official culture embraced minority voices in unprecedented numbers in the 1980s. Women, artists of color, and artists whose "differentness" was not immediately apparent—male and female homosexuals—were welcomed to the pantheon of the avant garde for creating works of art out of their special perspectives. With the avant garde's need for a transgressive edge, the validation of "body" art and exploration of gender identity gave rise to the first wave of openly homosexual art.

Whereas Pop Art had appropriated the pin-up from girlie magazines for its "swinging" associations of popular culture, homosexual artists moved farther afield for images that could be seen to reveal the values that structure Western culture and the relationship between sexuality and representation. Joining with feminist artists in deconstructing male heterosexual stereotypes, gay artists recognized the power of traditional gender-based signifiers to oppress and manipulate the individual. The continuing examination of the concrete physical and social structures of daily life has made visible the particular heterosexist connotations of common objects. The artists, in the full spirit of Jean Baudrillard's observation that contemporary life is a world of signs without meaning, suggested that things are often not simply what they appear to be in the course of social interaction, but rather, they exist as complex parts of a larger system of oppression, or as an unacknowledged subculture marker. The social and political symbolism of much of the work of the late 1980s and 1990s has enabled young artists to expose social perceptions and prejudices as well as allowed them to express their own sense of self without the traditional constraints that have served in the past to obscure the contributions of women, persons of color, and homosexuals.

In the mid-to-late 1980s, the prominence of minority voices that emerged in mainstream America's avant garde art created an environment of validation in which artists like Brett Reichman could flourish and develop an iconography of the "other" that would find widespread acceptance. The familiar and the exotic vie for attention in Reichman's paintings. Objects from the flea market or art history fill his studio and his paintings. One of the most engaging painters to emerge in the San Francisco Bay Area in the past decade, Reichman presents a prescient conundrum to the art world—a gay artist whose beautiful paintings, with their gay/camp subtext, present universal issues of human nature.

A devotee of the flea market, Brett Reichman has used the mass-produced flotsam of consumer goods and children's toys from the 1950s and 1960s to provide a source of imagery for his paintings, an imagery that allows the development of a complex dialogue of cultural critique and emotional revelation. Recognizing the fetishistic quality of certain decorative objects and the duplicity of the imagined innocence of simple childhood games and toys, since 1990 Reichman has created a world of surfaces that paradoxically peel back the veneer of these degraded artifacts of paradise lost. The molded rubber lambs and stuffed pixies of childhood, when combined with the Scyroco "gold" decorative fantasies of adulthood, become elaborately encoded symbols of class, lost innocence, and sexual otherness.

Over the past eight years, Reichman has created a brilliant body of works that expose the beauty of the absurd and reveal the sublime within the camp. His paintings of the nostalgic, meaningless frills that fill the lives of the

working class are triumphs of color, surface effects, and light. The faux decorative scrollwork that fills two-thirds of *A Painting That Tells A Story* (1997) creates an elaborate screen of rococo items that suggest both working-class longings for historicized "elegance" and the meaningless plethora of a consumer society. The molded gold plastic scrolls, keys, clocks, and mirror frames of the work create an elaborate environment for a group of children's toys that suggest a series of references both benign and bedeviling. The rubber lamb, with its tight, molded curls and little pink ribbons, suggests a universal symbol of innocence. The two loose lambs' heads offer the alternate universal association with sacrifice of the innocent. The artist has slyly suggested the vacuousness of both this imagined innocence and the nobility of its sacrifice through the upturned head, with its yawning emptiness. The painting is further animated by the presence of a group of pixies whose frozen smiles, bright blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and cheery red-striped bodies evoke the nostalgia of childhood and the scent of elderly talcumed aunties. The pixies or elves impart a sense of perky ebullience to a work that is intensified by the deep shadows and warm highlights of Reichman's color. The sense of dreaminess and absence in the painting is the result of the images and a quality of light that suggests both the waning sun and light falling into a dark closet—a closet of lost innocence and unmasked hollowness. The color is both warmly descriptive and spectral, almost toxic in its effect, as Reichman has manipulated the flow and drips of paint to create a further theatrical self-consciousness that locks the images onto the surface of the canvas. It is Toyland exposed, where things are not as they seem, and bad boys' noses grow longer by the minute.

Reichman's elves, pixies, and Pinocchio-like figures are potent symbols, able to suggest the guilelessness of childhood and the evil of duplicitious mischief-makers—the boys of summer and the world-weary men of the Castro in San Francisco. In works such as *Threefold* (1997), and *Ringling The Bell Backwards* (1997), Reichman creates metaphors for the human condition and veiled references to gay sexuality. The elves of *Threefold* find themselves knotted into a triangle of entanglement and vulnerability. The look of worry on one elf's face, in apt contrast to the others' obliviousness, suggests the awareness and threat of AIDS. *Ringling The Bell Backwards* presents an image of an elf folded up onto itself; exposed but self-contained, the image is an exercise in seeing. Finding the unexpected in looking at something from an unusual or odd angle, Reichman has suggested a mixture of innocence and the libidinous in his cheery, knotted imps. Legs and arms akimbo, unable to touch happiness, the elf somehow exposes a little slotted bell between its legs that suggests the pucker of an anus and availability. The provocative positions of the figures—with their knowing vulnerability and mischievously sinister implications—create a powerful sense of unease in the viewer. This aspect of the work is clearly homosexual, for it is without reference to the female in image or feel, and darkly ribald in its humor. Reichman questions whether happiness is possible in the age of AIDS, whether the trusting openness of childhood is still possible in this dangerous, violent age.

In Reichman's most recent paintings in this exhibition, the elfin characters are only residually present in the form of their jaunty stripes and often phallic appendages. The elves' cheerful striped fabric is immediately recognizable. Collective memory surges in—of thin, mean flannel, barely soft to the touch and so easily matted and soiled, redolent of carnival sideshow souvenirs and teleflorist tie-ons for Christmas bouquets. Like the Scyroco scrollwork of the earlier pieces, the striped fabric evokes the fantasies of a simpler time. These objects are actually fabricated by the artist; the forms in these paintings are the result of many hours of sewing and structuring prior to their being painted. Reichman is particularly interested in these works for their intersection of the formal and the narrative. The richly painted trompe l'oeil effects of these still lifes is seductive. The color is lush and voluptuous. The shimmering oil surface of a work such as *Parallelism* (1998) pulls the viewer inside and into the specific domain of painting—color, surface, touch. Reichman plays back and forth between a traditional painterly finish and a mechanical, almost photographic quality in his surfaces. Outwardly his flawless technique renders a cool, self-effacing surface, while the color and volumes in his compositions create an aesthetic pleasure, a mesmerizing beauty. The light and color in these latest oils are particularly cinematic, as



if the artist were playing with the hue dial on a television monitor to bring in more pronounced shadows and highlights just a little too bright.

The imagery of these paintings is filled with suggestion and equivalence. The tangle of appendages and masses suggests bodies bound together physically with ropes and emotionally by desire. The tangled limbs with their solid-colored mitts, like fools' caps or perhaps condoms, and more than suggesting un-circumcised phalluses in shape and demeanor, protrude from the bound mass and animate the composition of *Too Hard A Knot To Untie* (1998). Reichman suffuses these forms with an undercurrent of desire and sounds a cautionary note concerning the foolishness of being submissive. In *It's Hard To Be Happy* (1998), the ropes and knotting suggest acts of contrition, or allude to the confluence of fantasy and reality in gay sexuality, and more universally, to the constraints of a relationship with its limits and compromises. Pleasure, beauty, and sex inform the paintings of Brett Reichman and shape all interpretations of the works.

The personal, the intuitive, and the physical all find metaphorical expression in work that suggests both the universal and the specific. As

a gay man, Reichman gives form to the issues of vulnerability and trust in today's complex world, and through his imagery, he unleashes a certain emotional terrorism. He has found ways to represent difficult ideas about the structures of childhood, and to make clear previously latent perceptions concerning homosexuality. Through the archetypes and signifiers of his work, the artist is saying something revelatory about the transitoriness of youth, the elusive nature of trust, and the absolute necessity of love. The accessibility of his referenced objects—the lambs, pixies, scrollwork, and knots—is disarming for a broad audience and provides a ready access to the more complex and difficult gay and autobiographical aspects of the work. The surprisingly universal alter egos that the little elves offer Reichman give him a ready-made symbol for both the tenderness of childhood and the rawness of adulthood. It is within the tension of these polarities that Reichman gives voice to the risks, both physical and emotional, of gay sexuality and the conflict between safety and passion.

Bruce Guenther
Chief Curator

(cover)
Too Hard A Knot To Untie, 1998

(right)
Paradellism, 1998

(backcover)
Threshold, 1997

(overleaf)
A Painting That Tells A Story, 1997

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