Brilliant Rejects

An Interview with Allison Schulnik

by Robert Enright

Allison Schulnik admits to having a love/hate relationship with oil paint, just as we might admit to having one with what she paints. "I hate the toxicity of it; I hate the way it smells; and I hate that you can't get it all over yourself and not worry about having alien children." As it turns out, her subjects—animals, hobo clowns and ectoplasmic girls—are her alien children. They are messy and gooey and not always easy to like. *Big Monkey Head*, 2008, is terrifying; too close to our barbaric selves for any degree of comfort, its pink gums and red mouth move from delicate to dangerous in a flash; her *Skipping Skeleton*, 2005, flies gleefully through a field of gorgeous flowers that would make Emil Nolde envious. Schulnik's close cousins in the painting fraternity are Van Gogh, Soutine and Auerbach, the thick-pigment crew for whom paint makes an almost three-dimensional field as much as it covers a flat surface.

Her hobo clowns are complicated characters, at once sympathetic and threatening. *Hobo Clown #3*, 2008, is dressed as a dandy; he wears his blue and white striped scarf with a sartorial devotion matched only by the animal devotion with which his dog looks up at him. (This is the same character Schulnik uses in her transformative animation video, a visual narrative of paint run wild.) But in *Hobo Clown #4*, 2008, she presents the dark side of hobo clowning: this time the figure and his pet stare out blackly from a gloomy background. He has the posture of a dejected actor about to mumble a soliloquy, something about the meltdown of his too solid, painterly flesh. In this Shakespearian vein, the spectral abundance of *Three Girls*, 2009, does make you think of Macbeth's witches until you discover they are lifted from an Ecto Porn website where young Asian woman are slimed with ectoplasm while having sex. Schulnik has said she likes the theatricality of the grotesque, and that sense of visual theatre is full on in her composition of these figures.

There are also variations on the hobo clowns; *White Visitor # 2*, 2006, *Blue Zombie*, 2007, and *Small Green Man*, 2008, all partake equally of monstrous painterliness and simple monstrosity. These characters can be lost souls. In *What Awaits You*, 2006, she offers a portrait of our inescapable future: a crowd of elegantly painted skeletons loiter about the canvas like extras from a film directed by James Ensor. Death is what awaits you: what you see is the nightmare you get.

Girl with Animal #2, 2008, is something of a reprieve from this death watch. The subject of the painting (she has done three versions) developed from a series of found photographs of 1980s porn that combined girls and animals. What attracted Schulnik was the "animal quality" shared by the creatures and the humans. The work is her version of Henri Rousseau's *The Dream* (painted a century earlier in 1910), minus the pipe player and the jungle foliage. She has set her woman and striped tiger on a plain saturated with a rainbow palette. Instead of a braided, reclining odalisque, her unruly, long-haired blonde is on all fours, pink and poised to attack. The curve of her buttocks and swirl of her nipple give off a message quite different from her demonic eyes and lethal clownlike mouth. You can't tell if she'll eat or be eaten. In composing these images Schulnik conflates animal images with photographs of herself. "I think that endows them with human qualities," she says. What is so mesmerizing about her version of humanity is that it displays, in equal measure, the unabashed beauty and violent fury of the human animal.

Hobo Clown #3, 2008, oil on canvas, 84 x 60". Images courtesy Mark Moore Gallery, California, Miu Miu Gallery, New York.

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Allison Schulnik was interviewed by phone in LA by Robert Enright on June 17, 2009.

BORDER CROSSINGS: Do your characters play into your personal sense of self or are they an entirely invented body of characters?
ALLISON SCHULNIK: I think they're both. They are based in reality, but I definitely go to a fantastical, otherworldly place. I think a lot of the time it's impossible for me not to slip into the characters. I use pictures of people around me, and I take a lot of pictures of the hobos near where I live. I also find pictures in books or on the 'net. To make it stay in reality rather than become complete fantasy, I'll sometimes take a picture I really love of somebody and use that as reference. I'd say it's probably 50/50.

What kind of detail or incident would bring it back to reality for you?
I think it's in the eyes where it looks human, even if it's an animal, a creature or a tree. I'm always searching for this humanity.

In the *Hobo Clown* video, all the transformation the image undergoes is generated from the eyes. It seems to be your point of departure.
I don't know why; it's just something I'm fixated on. I'm starting a couple of paintings where the eyes and the faces are covered, so we'll see how that works. There is also a long history of the gaze in painting and film, so that may have something to do with it.

You tend to make everything animate and animal. You have a piece called *Watcher Pot*, so that even a vessel becomes something that looks back out at the viewer as much as the viewer is able to look in at it.
Yes, they're my cast of sympathetic rejects. I called my first show something like "Fools, Rejects, and Sanctuaries." It's a theme that goes through pretty well every show I ever did. Somebody was asking me where the girl with the animal came from; they got the sense that the girl was more animal-like and the animal was more like a human. I thought that was pretty right on.

It's hard to decide which of those two creatures is sexier. Both of them seem about to explode with visceral energy. Is that intentional?
That piece was based on 1980s porn photography. I found a little series of girls with animals, and it was their shared animal quality that sparked my interest. I think I've done three versions of that painting.

There are drawings for a number of the paintings. Am I right in assuming the drawings are used as studies that anticipate the paintings?
Yes. I have a bunch of sketchpads, and I do a lot of ballpoint pen drawings. Sometimes I do studies after I do the painting. At other times the drawings come before to help figure out the painting. They're pretty loose and chicken-scratchy. I think I'm more successful when I do detailed chicken scratches.

Does the drawing give you a sense of composition? Because no drawing could compete with the three-dimensional quality of your paint handling.
To me it's the same. I'm painting a lot of lines with the pen. But composition is also important in the drawing; if the drawing doesn't have something strange and interesting going on, then the painting probably isn't going to work either. The paintings aren't just about texture. Texture is secondary to the soul of the character I'm painting, and that also gets figured out in the drawings.

Are they part of some narrative world you're inventing, or are they figures and situations that are independent of any narrative?
I don't know the answer to that. I think they could definitely come together in the film work. I do see them from the same world. Again, I think it's healthy not to know too much about what you're doing.

Does the paint come off the palette board, or do you use the tube as a paintbrush?
I do a lot of mixing. I definitely squirt it on but I don't always like using the tube. I use my hands a lot and a lot of the paint is recycled. It's from old paintings and failed experiments and it gets scraped onto plates. I have 50 or so plates sitting around my studio with blobs all over them, and they dry a little and then they get plopped on and sculpted into something. I have a couple of paintings in my studio that are five years old and now they're rock hard.

1. Bacchic (New Year's Eve Painting), 2005, oil on canvas, 72 x 78". Image courtesy Pilar Ponce Gallery, New York.
2. What Awaits You, 2005, oil on canvas, 84 x 120".

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You must have some affection for oil paint, otherwise you would never work this way.
It's a love/hate relationship. I hate the toxicity of it; I hate the way it smells; and I hate that you can't get it all over yourself and not worry about having alien children. I do get paint all over myself. I'm pretty sloppy and cleanliness is not involved in my painting practice. I used acrylic for many years, but it just doesn't have the texture, the colour and the butteriness of oil paint, so I'm stuck with it.

Is the world of the grotesque lurking somewhere below the surface of what you're doing?
A little. I really like the theatricality, the drama and the fake version of things. But you have to realize that I like gnomes, trolls and weird little creatures in that created world but not as reality. Actually, I was getting into Vikings and the whole Norwegian thing.

You said you wanted to do a series about Klaus Kinski. Were you interested because of *Nosferatu* or because of Kinski's general weirdness?
I love him. He's like my characters, and I have started the series. I connect to these rejects who are brilliant and foolish at the same time, the ones who are so completely dedicated to their craft that they almost become aliens. I'm drawn to these stubborn outsiders because they need love and they're such sympathetic figures.

You're a very good monkey painter. Do you know why you're so attracted to that animal? He turns up often and even your hobo clown gets monkeyfied.
I think it's because they're so human. The big monkey heads are from found photographs, but the full portraits are based on photographs of me, or on someone I know. I think that endows them

with human qualities. The hobos were also based on pictures of me. They were supposed to be male characters, but because of their source they may be ambiguous. I take pictures of myself and of the local hobos, and I also like paintings of old Norman Rockwell hobos. I have no shame; I'll take them from everywhere.

A lot of your hobos look like figures out of the Beijing Opera.
I don't really have a musical theatre background, but I have a dance background, and I'm a big musical theatre buff. The hobos are theatrical, and I don't ever want them to be of one world. They come from different places.

The big woolly monkey looks like he's coming out of Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children*. There's something terrifying about that image at the same time that it's beautiful.
I'm as attracted to that kind of violent fury as I am to beautiful things. That monkey is one of my best examples of violence and beauty coming together.

Do you want them to be beautiful and what would be the nature of that beauty?
I do, but it's definitely not a typical version of beauty. I think it's a grotesque beauty. I just scrapped this 12-foot-long painting with a bunch of figures because it was hideous. While you may be searching for paintings that are grotesque and beautiful, you can cross a line where it's so muddy and ugly that it's just ugly.

Do you fail a lot in the studio?
Definitely. I scrap tons of paintings. It used to be that every painting had 10 paintings underneath, but over the last two years I've been trying to start on new canvasses. I felt it was distracting to the subject when there was so much underneath it. So they got a little cleaner.

***Three Girls* is a painting which is simultaneously gorgeous and gruesome.**
The girls are actually based on this new form of Japanese pornography called Ecto Porn. There are photographs and videos of girls being doused with buckets and buckets of fake ectoplasm. They're the most beautiful images of girls trapped in this goo.

Is making the paintings a sensual thing for you?
I think it's more a zone. It's definitely a place to go. I'm probably not a pleasant person when I don't get to work.

The other thing that interested me in seeing your work is how carefully you install it. The relationship between the paintings and the ceramic objects seems critical.
I probably think about it more than I should. I'm pretty obsessive about everything I do. But I definitely had a plan for the last few shows.

Big Monkey Head, 2008, oil on canvas, 88 x 80". Detail on right.

I'm drawn to these stubborn outsiders because they need love and they're such sympathetic characters.

You can see how well it works. The connections between the different kinds of objects in your exhibitions are extremely resonant.
It's more interesting when you have a waterfall next to a hobo. There are worlds that you create when you put together two different things.

There is one strange piece, called *Horses*, 2007, that reminded me of Cecily Brown's rabbit paintings.
Those were the first big paintings I did five or six years ago. I can see the connection to Cecily Brown. I think she's amazing. But I should add that the "Horses" paintings are also connected to my dance background. They're like choreographies where the horses are moving in such a way that it makes me think they're dancing.

Were you serious about dance?
I was really serious about it and it's still my first love. I studied everything: ballet, jazz, modern and tap. There's really nothing like it. It has a performance aspect that painting lacks, which is why I think I'm a bit of a show off with my brush strokes.

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I was shocked by your landscapes. The tree forms in *Burned Tree No. 1* seem to be involved in some kind of perverse commingling. Oddly enough, they carry a residual surrealism, as if Yves Tanguy had designed the landscape.
That's interesting. Those were based on photographs taken on the way to visit a friend in California. I just fell in love with this crazy, dead landscape that had been destroyed by the fires in 2007. It was this landscape of death, and the trees had become their own entity. They were like a new species that took on their life in death. That was really beautiful to me, so I took a lot of photographs of the way they twisted around each other when they were burning.

Looking at your paintings makes me think of of Chaim Soutine, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, European and British painters who also used thick pigment.
I love Soutine and Kokoschka. I must have been 13 or 14 when I saw an exhibition of German Expressionists at the San Diego Museum of Art. I remember seeing a Soutine painting of this crazy knitting lady, and I actually said to myself, "I want to paint like that." And, of course, there's Van Gogh. I always thought the real way to paint was with texture, and if you didn't use texture, then you weren't a real painter. I don't feel that way now but I definitely did when I was a teenager.

Are your sunflowers a tribute to van Gogh?
You can't paint sunflowers with a lot of oil paint and not pay him tribute. Anyway, he deserves it.

In the same way your still life work has a strong sense of Emil Nolde.
I love Nolde, especially his watercolours, and the way they swirl into one another. Using paint with a lot of water in it is similar to using a lot of paint.

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1. *Three Girls*, 2009, oil on canvas, 60 x 72".

2. *Girl with Animal*, 2009, oil on canvas, 60 x 84".

The challenge is to come through that chaos and find the fine brush stroke or detail that makes it something. But I think it's impossible for painters like Nolde and Ensor not to seep in.

The quality of colour in your ceramic work often seems to mimic the colours that turn up in your paintings. Do you see a similarity between the two practices?
Colour is really important to me and they definitely tie into each other. I search for the same types of colours and things in ceramics that I do in painting, but it's hard because you're limited in ceramics, whereas there are no limitations in painting.

You said that when you started school, painting was dead and deservedly so. But there's been an interesting reconsideration of painting. Are you happy about the fact that you're a painter and that painting seems very much alive in the hands of your generation?
I am surprised. Everything needs to have time away. It's like a relationship. You need to have some time away from painting to see why it might be necessary again. The fact that it comes in and out of favour is necessary because it makes people have to do something different.

To find a way to revitalize the form itself?
Exactly, people who need to paint have that kind of passion. I don't care, I'll just paint anyways.

Every so often critics come along and say that the novel is dead. Similarly, they've been declaring painting dead every decade for the last 50 or 60 years, but like a cat it seems to keep coming back with another life.
Yes. It's just people doing different things. As long as people continue to do that and be true to themselves, I think painting will probably continue to transform in weird ways. ∎