

whitehot | October 2008, Allison Schulnik @ Mike Weiss Gallery



Allison Schulnik, Big Monkey Head, oil on canvas 2008 courtesy Mike Weiss Gallery

I got off of work at seven o'clock on Thursday night, met a friend and headed to Chelsea for the openings. The goals were to find an interview subject and to score some free beers. And, as always seems to be the case, we arrived to find ice troughs full of just that, ice. I hate that they don't stock more beer for these things!

Anyhow, it was a fine, fine night in Chelsea. Gallery after gallery gave me all the reason I need to put the paintbrushes away forever. Pavel Zoubok Gallery was (is) featuring work by Mark Wagner that consists of more dollar bills cut up and reformed into collage than I'll make this year. To top that, the pieces are beautifully crafted, humorous and elegant to the highest degree. And then Diana Al-Hadid at the Perry Rubenstein gallery has got me thinking that the world really might end when they fully activate the new atom-smashing device, officially known as the Large Hadron Collider, on the Franco/Swiss border...

Moving along we came across a crowd in front of the Mike Weiss gallery on Twenty-Fourth Street. The smell of oil paint was pouring out of the gallery as if it were a Cinnabon for artists. And instead of overweight travelers gorging on fatty cake and icing we found underfed people guzzling wine (they were out of beer too) and taking in some thoroughly gorgeous paintings.

The subject matter in this show would look tired if painted by the lot of us; Hobo clowns, still life's with flowers, some animals and a couple of landscapes, among other things. Ms. Schulnik, however, manages to make them boil. She dominates the canvasses with a force that suggests that with her, the membrane between the world in which we inhabit and the intangible universe that many artists struggle to represent is very thin.

The paint is piled on extravagantly and appears to be frantically worked with straight from the tube gobs galore and obvious hand as brush work. The figures here range from sloop shouldered hobos glaring hotly back at you to animals mid-scream to flowers which appear quiet and dear in contrast. There is also a Claymation video that is exactly what you would expect to see if one of these paintings were shocked into life. Littered about the floor are ceramic sculptures of haunted animals and weirdo little musclemen, so watch your step...

The show is entitled *No Luck Too* and is Allison Schulnik's first solo show in New York City. Ms. Schulnik (b.1978) is based in Los Angeles, has shows coming up in Santa Monica, Salzburg Austria, and a solo at Unosunove in Rome scheduled for 2009. She was kind enough to speak with me last weekend....

How is L.A. treating you today?

It's good, one of the first cool days in L.A...

Where is your studio?

It's downtown, in an industrial area near the fruit markets and fish markets...

Part of what pulled me off of the street and into the gallery was that I could smell the paint from a block away...a bit of sensory porn for paint lovers...you seem to Love the material...

Yeah well...it's probably more of a love-hate relationship than a love relationship.... I love using as much paint as I can and being kind of decadent with it and not holding back, I don't like limitations...limitations are kind of evil...

Can you tell me a bit about how you work...is it a manic process for you?

I mean,I try not to spend a lot of time on a piece, I go for spontaneity and gesture...using my hands a lot. I do a lot of drawings and then go into the paintings...sometimes I go right into the paintings...I use my hands and the tube a lot. I get a few boxes of paint every month, and go through it all...and for every painting that gets seen, there are like ten that don't work out...but then all of that paint gets recycled, scraped off and reused...that's where a lot of the clumps come from. I pretty much never throw paint away, its expensive. And its all oil paint, I used to use a lot of molding paste but I haven't done that in years.

Mark making and texture seem just as important as the subject matter...

Yeah, it's important to me... the color, texture, and composition...just as much as the subject matter.... The texture always has a place, a reason... but then sometimes I just use it, it goes along with the no limitations thing.

There must be twenty beautiful pictures under each of these pieces?

That could be true... but then a lot of making a picture is knowing when to stop, I hope I'm not covering up something good but I'm sure that it happens...

"Niagara Falls #5" is my personal favorite picture in the show, one of my favorite pictures right now period. If I were a big money collector I would picking that one up...but this picture feels less distressed than some (most) of the others in the show...Does something change when you treat landscapes?

Ummm...I think that to me they are really in the same world. I was using the landscapes as kind of a sanctuary for these lonely, isolated characters...they are like the happy moments... like some of the moments in the claymation. I feel that it's important to have some happy moments along with the sad. That's important to me.

I can't talk about these pictures without speaking of the eyes...I think you are trying to poke holes in our souls with the glares! I don't even want to stand directly in front of some of these pictures...(I think I heard a smile through the phone)...

Yeah, that's awesome... I think the eyes are the most important part of the picture... through history that's often been the case with portraiture, like the eyes following you across the room... I lay the eyes in first, cause if the eyes aren't working, or poking holes in your soul, as you say, its not going to work... I spend a lot of time on the eyes.... definitely.

From where are the influences in a piece like "Girl With Animal."? Literature? Folklore?

My painting influences are probably aligned more with film and music and other painting than with literature. I definitely take a lot of influence from film... I know artists are supposed to be influenced by literature (laughing)... maybe its just from film school and growing up with film and all that... But, in animation there is a huge folklore and fairy tale influence and I'm definitely into that... you know with the Brother's Grimm... And cartoons, the old Disney

stuff from the thirties. The girls in the pictures come from old animated porn...I love taking these things and making them into my own kind of world.

Music?

I like everything... I'm into a lot of metal, Big Business, Mouth of the Architect, Kalas, High On Fire, everything though really... Barry Manilow, ok maybe not Barry Manilow...Roky Erickson, Grizzly Bear, Beegees, Babs... and dance...I like hip-hop too, Wu-Tang, J Dilla...Some R&B too, old guys like Solomon Burke and some 90's...R Kelly. I love all kinds of music. A lot of the energy in the paintings comes from it... I can't paint without music on; it's not going to happen....

I had a run in with Liza Minnelli the other day on the Upper East Side...

I love her! I would love to paint her...she could be one of the influences. I also want to work on some human with animal spirit type of work...

What about the ceramic pieces in the show and on your website...is that a constant in your work?

I think the pottery is a nice break from painting, it gets me out of the studio and I can be around people... its funny to see people in the (pottery) studio focusing on perfection, trying to get that perfect vessel...I try to celebrate the mistakes and kind of let the mistakes take over... this blobby thing.... and with the green man face I think my next film will be a green man wrestling film....

Influences...kindred spirits?

I like a lot of James Ensor... and I really like Hockney, Phillip Guston, we missed the show when we were there. Rousseau, I'm really into Balthus, and Bosch... I'd say Guston and Balthus are my favorites. And with the animation, Jan Svankmajer and Bruce Bickford, the claymation master...their influence definitely spans over everything...the paintings as much as the animation.

A friend of mine left the show in love with the claymation...particularly the fire. He was stoked about the low-tech methods...

Yeah...I love using simple methods, a little foil and a flashlight. The purist form! I like everything handmade.... Really, like with the ceramic and the painting, and even the animation, it all has the handmade quality...I Love everything anti computer, anti robot...except with the animation I shot on digital... But I used to use only sixteen and I would really like to get back to that, maybe some thirty-five... And there is no computer in the animation itself, only clay. All clay....

Can you tell me a bit about your upcoming solo show in Rome?

I don't know yet, I'm just having the show at Unosunove, but I don't really know yet. I just finished the film...don't know what I'm going to do for the show. This is the longest I've ever gone without painting, it's been like three months and I usually paint every day... hopefully I didn't forget how to paint. I think I want to do a Klaus Kinski series...

It will be all new work?

It will be all new paintings.....I work a lot so I always have new work.....

No Luck Too will be up at Mike Weiss Gallery at 520 West Twenty-Fourth Street through October Eleventh. You can see more of her work at www.allisonschulnik.com

whitehot gallery images, click a thumbnail.



Andrew M. Simmons was born in 1978 in Cincinnati Ohio. His youth was spent there. Mr. Simmons Attended the Ohio State University earning a BFA in 2001. He spent some time in the Appalachians of Tennessee before moving to Jersey City in 2002. The Heights of Jersey City have been his home ever since. twoheadgiraffe@yahoo.com

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