

REVIEW - 11 NOV 2003

Bill Saylor

Leo Koenig, New York, USA

BY LISI RASKIN



Visting Bill Saylor's recent show of paintings and sculpture, 'Softail Project', was like travelling through a disruptive mechanism that belched exhaust fumes as it overturned the world order, which usually sites humans at the top of the food chain. Saylor manages this inversion by tapping into a reality that is anthropomorphic by design - here it's the animals that indulge in conspicuous consumption, skateboarding and heinous crime.

The show comprised a series of large-scale canvases and one sculpture. Like Saturday morning cartoons, Saylor casts members of the animal kingdom in starring roles. 'Softail Project' continues his focus on how the natural world will adapt to ecological disaster. For example, in the painting *Kingpin* (2003) a black bear and an octopus escape to their love nest on the banks of a mountain lake. In this piece inter-species mating becomes the logical, if not obligatory, practice for the continuation of life. Saylor's language marries skateboard and biker cult paraphernalia with expressionistic, impasto paint application and a variety of other image-making techniques, including the iron-on transfer of digital images. These disparate approaches embody the ways in which the human information infrastructure can be utilized to achieve a slew of perverse ends.

One of these is a solitary, mixed-media sculpture of a polar bear, *Perfect Drift* (2002), which towers above the mutated and mutilated fauna who inhabit the slime-green, oil-slick landscapes of Saylor's paintings. An amalgamation of fake fur, plaster and polystyrene, the sculpture sports a peg leg and two eye patches, and has suspiciously grown a third eye. It hovers on a pedestal that is laminated with aluminium foil and adorned with marker and paint pen graffiti, and looks as though it originated in a suburban skate park.

Saylor's penchant for applying human medical technology to the physical ailments and deformities suffered by animals only strengthens the analogous relationship between the skyscraper and the beehive. *Perfect Drift* hints that some animals will survive our environmental oversights, adapt to polluted wastelands, loot our stores, learn to use our technology and capitalize on our leisure, lifestyle and fetish commodities. Saylor's work rides a satirical line, implicating members of the animal kingdom and presidents of companies with an equally derisive gesture. In a painting entitled *I'm Not Only a Client, I Own the Company* (2003) the owner of the company is depicted as a self-congratulatory, omnipotent skeleton that beacons the viewer forward with a crooked index finger. The title of the painting is scrawled in a distraught font somewhere between the 'steal your face' of Grateful Dead notoriety and a carnivalesque school desk drawing.



http://www.messe-karlsruhe.de/messe_karlsruhe_en/index.php

Hung directly to the right of this painting, as if to present a cause-and-effect scenario, is the most overtly political work in the show, *Gasoline Dream* (2003). Here fanged snakes and humanoid life forms adorn the mayhem of chemical destruction, as petroleum products become petroleum people. The composition of this painting hinges on the dramatic presence of a two-headed, bald eagle whose innards are made from an iron-on digital image of a car engine block. In this case animal and machine conceptually and physically amalgamate as the ubiquitous automobile becomes a backbone and the fuel pumps, by extension, a vascular system. Even the iron-on image embodies flesh when set in the heavily impastoed paint surface that Saylor uses to depict the soft tissue of the eagle. Perhaps it is the leaching of petroleum-based chemicals from our washing machines that has produced

such astonishing metamorphoses in the surrounding population. It is certainly this type of leaching that allows oil paint and iron-on transfers to exist seamlessly in the same space.

Decidedly absent from all of Saylor's paintings is any trace of blood, although maiming and decapitation, death and mutilation, are definitely in the air, much like the representations of violence in the cartoons to which they refer. Danger is also paramount: massive, wrathful and looming.

While Saylor's depiction of life after ecological disruption side-steps the hackneyed rhetoric of environmentalism, the violence it depicts hinges on the same entertainment world logic that allows Wile E. Coyote to spring back to life after a seemingly lethal plunge into a dusty canyon. Yet the premonition that animals will evolve in order to survive in the next stage of human civilization is, after all, a fascinating way for consumer culture to absorb the myth of nature and perpetuate itself in the process. Ultimately, what could be more alluring than an animal re-enactment of the wretched and excessive behaviours that are normally relegated to the most criminal and desperate human subcultures?

LISI RASKIN



BILL SAYLOR

LEO KOENIG

LISI RASKIN



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London

1 Montclare Street
London
E2 7EU, UK
+44 (0)203 372 6111

New York

247 Centre St
5th Floor
New York, NY 10013
+1 212 463 7488

Berlin

Zehdenicker Str. 28
D-10119 Berlin
Germany
+49 30 2362 6506

