

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

artcritical

Fuzzy Reception: Michael Berryhill at Kansas

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Michael Berryhill, installation view, "Michael Berryhill: Beggars Blanket," 2014, KANSAS New York. Courtesy of the Artist.

A cursory glance at Michael Berryhill's paintings could lead to a mistake on the order of confusing fiberglass insulation with cotton candy. So beware of complacency induced by pastel colors, sensuous surfaces and snarky titles. Something disturbing may be lurking behind the cheerful ambiguities in the nine new paintings and vitrine of drawings in his new show at Kansas Gallery.



Michael Berryhill, Saturn n Son, 2014.
Oil on linen, 80 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the Artist and KANSAS, New York.

Saturn n Son (all 2014), a play on words of the '70s sitcom Sanford and Son, is the title of two initially puzzling paintings in Kansas's rear room. Layered in mostly blues and rusty browns, they seem to represent an indistinct, non-descript figure, which could be a piece of disintegrated statuary, bent over in some kind of activity. Without knowing the title, the activity could range from manual labor to microscopic examination.

However anyone who has a passing acquaintance with art history will immediately recognize the Saturn in the title as the one Goya depicts devouring his son. Which of course makes the figure in Berryhill's painting discernable as Goya's wild-eyed, child-eating demon, and Berryhill's resonances with Goya more obvious. The TV show reference emphasizes a bit of campy goofiness in the Goya seen from the present, despite the horrific subject matter, and conveys a spirit of ambivalence that permeates this work.

Berryhill is not ambivalent about his ambition however. Though modest in scale, the paintings use expensive, thick-weave linen, a high culture archival maneuver that serves to offset some of the low culture references, and telegraphs his seriousness. Berryhill nods to not only Goya, but Picasso, Matisse and Bonnard, as well as his contemporaries, such as Dana Schutz. He places himself in an early

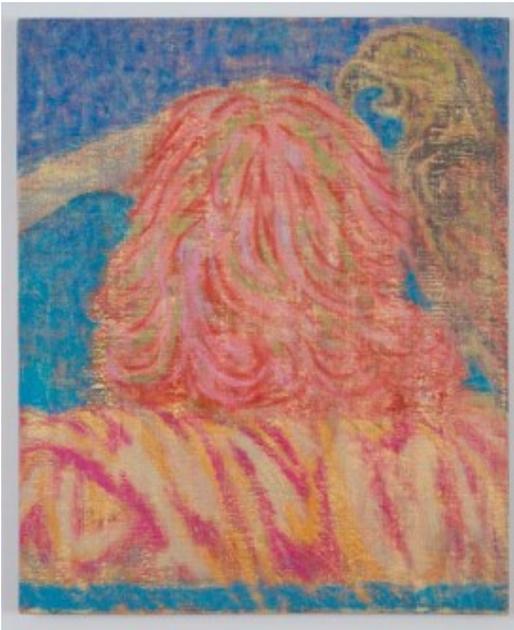
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modernist painting tradition that, despite an apparently abstract affect, is always representational in its ultimate methods.

The major ambivalences in this show concern the perception of the imagery and how important it is to decipher it. Berryhill presents his subjects theatrically with proscenium-like verticals as quotation marks and a shallow horizontal strip at the bottom that stages each event. The grain of the linen, and small, dry brushstrokes allow Berryhill to use a halftone-like layering process, producing a surface of fuzzy colors and figure-ground inversions. The results are images seeming indefinite, corroded, or out of focus. Like the wordplay of his titles, each of Berryhill's paintings involves some kind of visual misreading or multiplicity of meaning. Indeed the very title of the exhibition, *Beggars Blanket*, is an obvious reference to the 1968 Rolling Stones album, *Beggar's Banquet*, replacing a humble repast with an inadequate fuzzy fabric (the canvases themselves?).

How we respond then is always dependent on how easily one psychologically negotiates the frustration of not being able to resolve the paintings into coherent images.



Michael Berryhill,
Long Long, Gone Gone, 2014.
Oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the
Artist and KANSAS, New York.

Some viewers will simply accept the work as abstract and just appreciate the sensuous, warm and fuzzy mood it projects, which can lead to overlooking a reference to parental cannibalism. But the sustained attention required of viewers to parse partial bits of imagery in hopes of a deeper comprehension carries a risk for the artist. Too much unresolved ambiguity, coupled with a flippant title, like *Axis of Easel*, might interfere with the painting attaining memorability, and the futility of finding resolution could overwhelm the artist-viewer bond.

Long Long, Gone Gone, a painting with fairly straightforward imagery, is a great ploy to engage one in the work's hermeneutics as well as a direct statement of Berryhill's themes. This painting depicts the back of a longhaired person, left hand to brow in a peering-off-into-the-distance gesture, and with a parrot on the right shoulder.

The formal ambiguities are easy to parse, but their metaphorical implications give the painting gravitas. The airy blue background, grading from ultramarine to cerulean, can be either sky or sea, or both, and the blue reappears at the bottom to frame the bust of a figure, who, given the layered hairdo and delicate wrist is probably meant to be seen as female. Or the bottom strip might indicate that the figure is submerged to her chest in water. To her chest that is, if the patterned rectangular shape spanning the canvas is her back, and not in fact the back of a couch. The parrot, as signifier of

both imitation and piracy, is depicted as a degraded representation. The searching gesture, which echoes our own concentration of looking, seems futile because nothing can be deciphered from the scumbled brushstrokes that represent the distance.

The title, *Long Long, Gone Gone*, can represent not only our own fruitless attempts to find meaning in Berryhill's paintings, but perhaps an elegy for the past itself — a recognition that painting has departed as the major vehicle for conveying cultural meaning. Despite the rigor and

purpose that Berryhill brings to his paintings, there is also a sophisticated understanding of that ship having already sailed, and we peer desperately at its surface, trying to understand why it exists, trusting only our own perceptions, Flaubert's stuffed parrot squawking useless artspeak at our shoulder.

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