

HYPERALLERGIC

Michael Berryhill Will Have You Seeing Faces

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October 8, 2017

Michael Berryhill has a fondness for fluorescent paints. His luminous palette – which includes dollops of Veronese green, tangerine orange, Van Gogh yellow, velvety violets, and cake frosting pink – makes me think of radioactive popsicles. He matches his quirky palette with equally zany pictorial inventions that tread the tricky ground between abstraction and representation. A group of these paintings can be seen in his current exhibition, *Michael Berryhill: A Window, Adore*, at Kate Werble Gallery (September 9 – October 28, 2017). According to the gallery press release:

Michael Berryhill partakes in a type of painterly pareidolia, the visual and psychological experience of seeing faces in otherwise unfamiliar patterns, finding meaning in its absence.

Pareidolia – which could also be called the art of seeing faces in unusual places (Jesus in a tree trunk or a taco) – suggests some kind of trickery or artistic sleight-of-hand. Occultists were believers and charlatans capitalized on it, but artists for the most part have eschewed it. Pavel Tchelitchew's "Hide and Seek" (1940-42), which went from being the most popular painting in the Museum of Modern Art's collection to being banished into storage for many years before being placed in a hallway to be passed by, is probably the best known example; "Hide and Seek" suffers from its aching Romantic seriousness, which is hardly a crime.

By working in this discounted area, in a way that is very much his own, Berryhill shares something with Tom Burckhardt, Sean Thornton, and Philip Taaffe, particularly the latter's works on paper from 2007-2009: all of them are interested in punning images and the child's game of now you see it, now you don't. The thing that sophisticated viewers find disturbing about "Hide and Seek" might cause them to back away from Berryhill's paintings: they initially strike you as private and inward looking. Give them time and you see how deftly Berryhill merges together divergent strands of form and content, from his weird fluorescent colors to a tender evocation of a smoking dog in "Narcisyphus" (2017), or is it really a homely painter we are looking at, with a receding hairline?

After a while, I realized that best thing to do was stop trying to name what I was looking at and enjoy whatever wacky associations I would make. There is a generosity to Berryhill's paintings that is rare in today's art world, which is full of people announcing their seriousness, importance, and greatness, all to no avail. The title "Narcisyphus" seems to be gently about those people – narcissists involved in the Sisyphean act of making art.

Berryhill's specialty seems to be the ability to bring you to a place of seeing where you can never quite be sure of what you are looking at, just as there is no way to verify what might cause some people to freak out, while others are unaffected. Isn't it enough that everyday life is



Michael Berryhill, "Narcisyphus" (2017), oil on linen, 38 x 30 inches

already difficult and paranoia-inducing?

Well, yes and no.

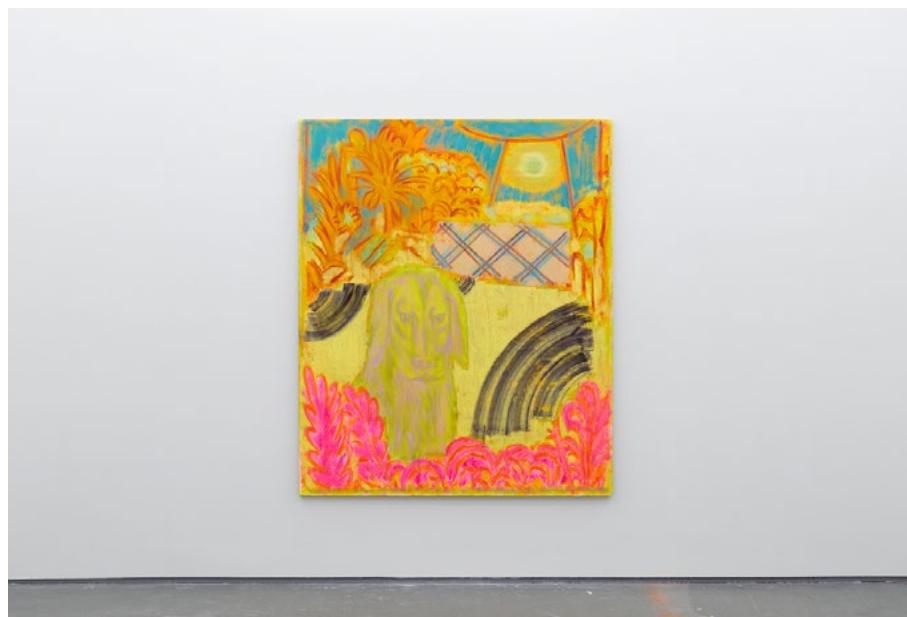
Berryhill paints thinly, seemingly working the image out on the canvas. Often the edges of the painting, where different colors peek through, show evidence of what preceded the picture you are seeing. The surfaces evoke pastels, their chalky luminosity. He draws in paint, outlining areas of color so they become leaves, or a tabletop, or an artist's palette. The marks can convey real things or remain resolutely abstract – as the two sets of stacked, semi-circular, black brushstrokes found in "Skeptic & Sun" (2017), as if made by a greasy windshield wiper. He can build an image that is graphic and strong, or one that seems to fade right before your eyes. These variations are necessary to the painting they are used in – despite the free use of unorthodox color and loose, improvisational brushwork, nothing Berryhill does feels arbitrary or contrived.

The acid-yellow dog staring somewhat ferociously out of "Skeptic & Sun" (2017) comes as a shock amidst the ambiguous images contained in the other paintings. And that is what is terrific about this exhibition. You never know what you are going to get; each painting is an adventure of seeing, a challenge to your powers of defining. Berry runs the gamut, from representation that seems to be based on observation, memory, or appropriation, to something unexpectedly dreamed up, where the so-called real meets the unreal and imagined. Is it a creature with a clown's red nose that I am looking at in "Funny Pages" (2017)? What is this terrible need to know?

What about the change in Berryhill's palette from painting to painting and how that inflects the mood? What are the figures up to in "Interrogation" (2017)? In both "Interrogation" and "Narcisypus," Berryhill depicts what appears to be a painter's palette behind a figure's head,



Michael Berryhill, "Funny Pages" (2017), oil on linen, 30 x 26 inches



Michael Berryhill, "Skeptic & Sun" (2017), oil on linen, 77 x 65 inches

a Martian halo. In "Interrogation," there are three figures, but two are severely cropped by the painting's edges: only the one seated in the middle is fully visible. That figure, along with the one whose hand extends in from the right edge, are holding tall highball glasses. The other figure, extending in from the left edge, is holding a paintbrush (it seems) and appears to be working on a canvas.

The goings-on feel strange, mysterious, and banal. You can spend your time trying to decipher the painting, or you can enjoy it, with its kaleidoscopic use of color and the unconventional way Berryhill has placed the forms in space. He makes no claims to being meaningful, and yet something challenging, compelling, interesting, tough, tender, sweet, and odd comes through. At a time when many artists are clamoring about how meaningful they are, Berryhill makes no such claim. That is a steadfast and heroic

thing to do in this day and age – inhabit an island of your own making, one that welcomes anybody who chooses to stop by – and never once descend into didacticism. It must give pleasure, wrote the poet Wallace Stevens. He wasn't kidding. Neither is Berryhill.

Michael Berryhill: A Window, Adore continues at Kate Werble Gallery (83 Vandam Street, Lower Manhattan, Manhattan) through October 28.



Michael Berryhill, "The Interrogation" (2017), oil on linen, 77 x 60 inches