

Review of Gabrielle Bakker at Davidson Galleries

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Intro:

Painter Gabrielle Bakker is inspired by a wide variety of art: Asian, Modernist, and Renaissance. For the last ten years, she has been working on a series of paintings in which all of these disparate sources combine in a completely original blend. The result is an exhibition, on view this month, in which the push and pull of tradition and innovation, depth and flatness, the familiar and the bizarre, makes for some fascinating viewing.

We are awash in a sea of images, but few artists celebrate this condition as enthusiastically as Gabrielle Bakker. Her recent work makes a virtue of its eclecticism, cobbling together highly original pictures from a huge array of sources, whose only common element is that the artist finds them worthy. It is one thing to appreciate art and artists from places as disparate as Classical Rome and Greece, Renaissance Italy and Flanders, and early 20th Century Paris; it is quite another to attempt to put together coherent pictures in which all of these influences – and more – are in play.

Gabrielle's work has long worn its links to artistic predecessors on its sleeve. But on closer examination even her simplest images defy attribution to a particular artist, or a particular narrative. A painting like Truth, for example, is superficially a portrait of an idealized young woman painted in the style of the Tuscan Renaissance. But a quick look at earlier artists like Sandro Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, or Filippo Lippi does not come up with a match, or even a close resemblance. Gabrielle's woman, unlike those of her sources, is ahistorical, unmoored. While every character in the paintings of the earlier artists plays a clearly-defined role in a story from religion or mythology that every contemporary observer was expected to already know, Gabrielle's woman stares out at us with an atmosphere of mystery, and withholding. Although she resembles in a vague way the artist herself, she is not of our world, or any world. She is static, complacent, unblinking. Her face is painted so as to suggest true dimensionality, but in a limited way, like a bas-relief framed with hair. There are no details of clothing or setting that can place her in time or space. She teases us with the prospect of recognition and understanding, but there's no resolving her enigmas. Who is she, and what is she doing? We aren't sure, and the artist isn't saying.

The above description might also serve for much of Gabrielle's earlier work, but the true revelation in the current show are the large recent paintings, which bring an enormous new set of references into the mix and thus raise the stakes considerably. These new works are also the largest Gabrielle has ever done, and the quality of the execution and attention to surface and detail is extremely impressive. Everything about them suggests that attention must be paid, but they are puzzle pictures and intriguing images rather than definitive statements, so as with Truth, the observer is left to draw their own conclusions.

I want very badly to understand the relation between the two magnificent women in Geisha and Surfer, for example, but they seem neither aware of each other, nor of us. Or, are they? In this major painting, a successful melding of wildly disparate styles, the key may be the hand mirror held by the geisha in the foreground. The geisha is seated in a room in front of a very unusual wall. The left hand portion of the wall has been painted with a sort of landscape with highly stylized, neo-Japanese waves set against a mountain range in silhouette; covering part of the upper wall is a dark, highly dimensional swag of decorated drape. The drape, the only totally realistic element in the image (it's effectively *trompe l'oeil*), seems to have been drawn back like a stage curtain to reveal the drama in progress.

On the right-hand side of the wall a painting of an androgynous figure in black silhouette, with wavelike white curls (a reverse version of the white-faced, black-haired geisha), is hung on top of a partly-visible banner with Japanese characters. But the focus of the back wall, is the center section, against which a tall, vertical painting is leaning. The painting features none other than Botticelli's Venus, recast as a California surfer girl, dressed in a pink bikini and holding a flesh-colored, vaguely phallic surfboard. The much larger Geisha, whose non-dimensional kimono is entirely made up of painted, collage-based origami paper, rests one hand on what appears to be an ancient Greek mask of tragedy; with the other, she stares at what might be her own face, but might as easily be the face of the Surfer Girl, visible above her own head; meanwhile, the Surfer Girl seems to be gazing at us. Gabrielle links the two women visually with a series of compositional swoops, including the hair bun of the geisha serving as pubic hair for the standing girl.

The painting virtually grabs us by the lapels and insists we contemplate these imaginative connections between goddesses Greek and Pop, culture secular and sacred. But resolution is impossible, any more than deciphering the hanging Kanji banner, a caption in a language we will never know. Pictures for Gabrielle retain their magic, but not their meaning; she makes the case with her work that a powerful image doesn't need an overarching message or coherent narrative to be effective as art.

Equally engaging, and offering more possibilities of interpretation, are a smaller but very layered series of paintings of a sort of love triangle involving a geisha, a Minotaur, and a dwarf/child. Consisting of three works (a fourth is in progress), the works are hung so as to be read as a sequence, and they can on one level be seen as a sort of feminist turning of the tables on the aggressive spirit of triumphant Modernism, symbolized by Picasso and his personal identification with the half-man, half-beast of Greek mythology. We're already on notice that Picasso is in the house, by the many images which suggest the work of the master, specifically his neo-cubist fracturing of the figure and the face. Most literally derivative is Gabrielle's 2005 Theseus Slaying the Minotaur, directly based on Picasso's 1925 The Kiss, recently at SAM, both pictures collage-inspired multi-figure jigsaws, almost but not quite fractured into incoherence.

To begin the three-part drama pictured here, Picasso/Minotaur attempts to assault the cubist-faced Geisha, with his tail approaching her crotch, in a lush interior filled with gold-leaf opium smoke and decorated with lovingly depicted tiles and tapestries. The drama of pursued and pursuer is echoed in the drama of the flat versus the dimensional, patterned surfaces wrestling with eruptions of dimensional form. The Minotaur, rejected, begs on his knees, while the geisha hides her contempt with a mask.

Finally, the geisha turns to leave with a tiny female companion, while the Minotaur attempts to drown his sorrows with a Neoclassical urn pouring out white braids of a bizarre fluid, while a dazed sage literally rides on his inebriated coattails.

The history of art that Gabrielle Bakker so lovingly raids has been overwhelmingly male up until recent times. Her striking, woman-dominated pictures (the men, when present, are either predatory or pathetic) have earned their right to both raid and tweak the legacy of Picasso, but her project of High Eclecticism - of which this is the first public showing - is still very much a work in progress.

Extro:

[A Decade: 2001-2011, Selected Works by Gabrielle Bakker](#), remains on view at Davidson Galleries in Pioneer Square through May 28. Artist, author, and critic Gary Faigin is co-founder and Artistic Director of the Gage Academy of Art, now registering for summer classes at its campus on Capitol Hill.