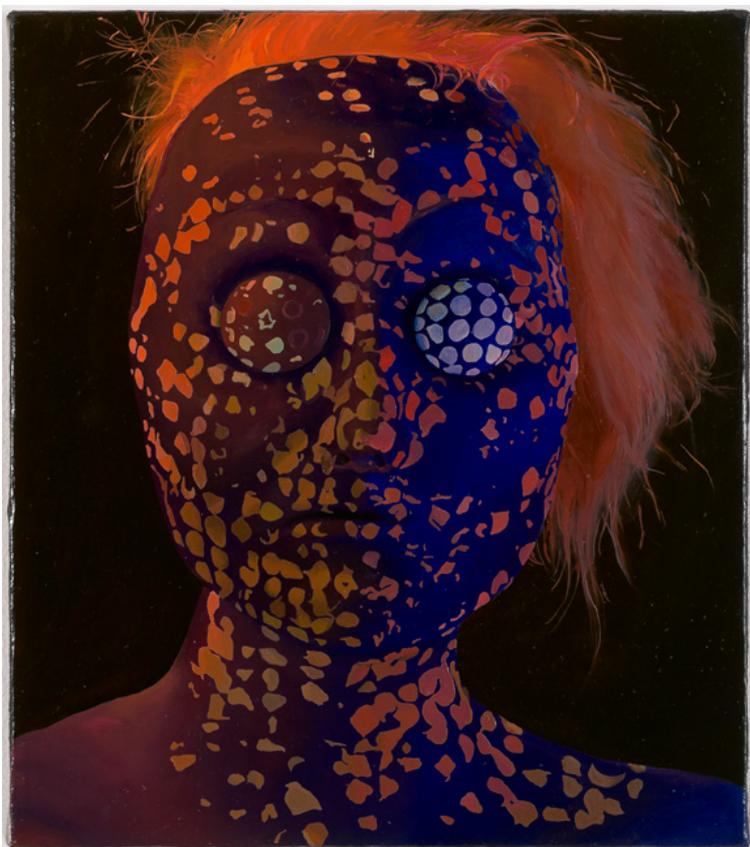


BOMBSITE

SASCHA BRAUNIG

by Aaron Gilbert Apr 22, 2011

Sascha Braunig speaks with fellow artist Aaron Gilbert on transformative acts of the body, and the transformative act of painting.



Eyes peeled, 2010, Oil on linen, 16 x 14 inches. Courtesy Foxy Production.

Braunig's paintings of hybrid figures exist in a shifting ground between portraiture and invention; painted in an ostensibly realist style, their fantastic coloration and augmented bodies suggest a parallel realm. These beings, though artificial, carry a unique personal and social charge. Her solo exhibition at Foxy Production is up through April 30th, 2011.

Aaron Gilbert | fluctuate between seeing the subjects as being mutilated or as being adorned.

Sascha Braunig I have impulses towards doing both, and I think that they're pretty related. I think that fashion and art have always mutilated the figure. I'm both attracted to and involved in that history, but also commenting on it.

AG You say mutilation and adornment are pretty related, could you expand on that?

SB Maybe I wouldn't use the word mutilated. But adorning the body is fashion, and fashion often uses death-like imagery in its treatment of the body. And of course figurative art is very decorative, but it has treated the body, especially the female body, pretty badly over the years.

AG Any specific moment that stands out in your mind, in that regard?

SB In art, literature, and fashion the female body is perpetually abstracted, reduced, distorted, or compared with inanimate objects. From Baudelaire to Picasso, to Otto Dix, to any kind of fashion photo. I immediately think of Hans Bellmer as an artist who is almost pathologically or sadistically distorting the female body.

AG You bring up comparing the female body to inanimate objects as something that's repeatedly done within art. You're painting objects that are inanimate, and you're using some of the most artificial materials possible to construct those objects, so the viewer's hyper-aware of how inanimate and how synthetic the models you create are, but it feels that you are breathing a certain energy or "being" into these objects.

SB Initially the figures come from life casts of real people. I've been using the same bust of a friend of mine for the whole series, and I also use casts of myself. It's important that there is a tension between their lifelessness and possible life-likeness.

AG Alteration of the body seems to be a recurring theme with the work. Do you think a lot about how this is changing within our culture in general, how cosmetic surgery at younger ages is much more commonplace? Is that a concern that you relate this work to at all?

SB Not explicitly. I think if humans had access to cosmetic surgery hundreds of years ago, they would have been using it. I think that its popularity today is kind of an inevitable result of our visual culture.

AG That's interesting. I was speaking with someone recently about the way the Maya would shape their skull so that it would be elongated, and drill holes in their teeth and insert jewels into them.

SB You're right, people have been altering their bodies in extreme ways for a long time.

AG But in this society it wasn't something that people had affordable or easy access to until recently, so in terms of the society we're in, what you say stands up. I do think there is a difference; in the past, body modification was tied to a larger ritual and was more a form of adornment, but the way things are now, it seems to be much more about fixing yourself. I feel like the mirror is involved in a much

different way.

SB ...Using the culture as your mirror.

AG ...Or as what we compare our reflection to. Ritualistic body modification and cosmetic surgery seem to have very different psychological agendas attached to them.

SB I'm interested in the people who use plastic surgery in a really extreme way, to make themselves into a different species, like a tiger or vampire, for example. The way people can individualize some of these potentially negative cultural trends, and take them to their most extreme possible conclusion.

AG That seems to be an embodiment of creativity, letting an inner spirit drive what you do, as opposed to trying to fit a standard. They just seem to be very different. When I've spoken with you before, you haven't framed your work overtly in terms of a politics of the body. Is there political work that you align yourself with?

SB I'm not apolitical, but I don't think that my work is about identity politics because it's coming from too personal a place. These paintings initially came from an aspiration to be critical, but my own desires get in the way. To bypass one's own aesthetic desires in the service of some kind of pure critique is ridiculous and impossible.

AG Is there artwork that you do align this body of work with? A certain history or period of time?

SB I've been looking at a lot of Northern and Flemish paintings, like Holbein, Van Der Weyden, Durer, and even Arcimboldo. I feel a strong connection with Lynda Benglis and Louise Bourgeois's work. And Christian Schad's.

AG You mention the Northern Renaissance; is that an aesthetic affinity or do you think there's something underlying some of the ambitions of that work that connects to what you're doing?

SB Dutch painters who were painting commissioned portraits in this drilling detail appeal to me aesthetically, and their style seems to be so appropriate to their subject, especially when they're painting to compete with other luxury goods. That style travels all the way forward in history into photography where, at least in commercial photography, the focus on certain details is so important.

AG That hits a keynote, when you say the style seems appropriate to the subject matter. When we think of other contemporary figurative painters, maybe looking back on the big household name portrait painters of the last 15-20 years, there seems to be a general impulse to keep things plainer or simple.

SB You mean like Alex Katz?

AG Yeah, you're looking at the Northern Renaissance instead of Alex Katz, who's also making luxury goods, depicting people who live in luxury.

SB I guess people don't necessarily use jewels to connote wealth anymore. You've quoted someone

as saying that Katz just presents a new kind of luxury lifestyle.

AG Yes, the statement of one critic has always resonated with me; that Katz's work is inherently political, because it's "celebrating everything that benefits from the war in Iraq." In your painting process, I feel that what's recorded more than anything else is the way the objects are illuminated—these moments where something glows within a fold or a crease of fabric. And it seems to relate to a classic metaphor of illumination symbolizing the presence of spirit or the divine. So does this use of light introduce an act of animism to the work?

SB Animism?

AG Animating something inanimate by attributing a soul to it. You would find it mostly within sculpture although you could say within Byzantine icon painting too...where a piece of art is made, and then a rite is performed to embed the artwork with a spirit or an energy. Are there traditions of art-making where that was present in the process that you connect your work to?

SB Even non-religious artists are either consciously or unconsciously trying to summon life all the time. And then often what's uncanny about the work is that it isn't quite lifelike. My favorite story about this theme is Oskar Kokoschka having his ex-lover Alma Mahler re-created as a puppet, and using the doll as an artist's model. In relation to my own work, I guess I have that impulse, but I try to recognize it.

AG One of the interesting things about this body of work is that you're using something that at first glance seems so discardable to be what you embed yourself into—there seems to be a cheapness to the materiality of the props you paint from. All the materials are as shiny as the objects in those Northern Renaissance paintings, but they're very affordable.

SB Religious people the world over use disposable materials to reflect their devotion, in shrines or what have you... That's just to say that the cost of the materials isn't necessarily commensurate with their importance.



Lashes, 2011, oil on panel over canvas, 22 x 18 inches. Courtesy Foxy Production.

AG It ties into a belief in the potential for the transformation of objects. So it's the objects that are readily accessible to everyone that can contain a certain cosmological power.

SB For me, the act of painting is what's transformative. For a photographer, they might have the same

feeling from the act of photographing.

AG How about influences outside of the painting world? I see David Lynch's *Fire Walk With Me* as being a potential visual influence.

SB Certainly. Also David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. The lighting I use in my studio is very inspired by over-the-top movie lighting. I use a lot of colored gels over lights, so it's sort of like a really low budget film or photo shoot.

AG How individual are the characters? Do you view them as self-portraits, or specific individuals or historical figures?

SB That's a tough one. I think they're more like portraits of a state of mind or a potential state.

AG Let me ask you about *Lashes*.

SB The title could refer either to eyelashes or to a mark or action, and these metallic paper-like strips that are peeling off the figures face could be either naturally occurring or a result of that action. I wanted the tension to be about not knowing how those strips resulted. And then also being a literalization of surface in that they're peeling away, and you can see another surface underneath. In most of the paintings in the show, the figures' surface or skin is highly enclosed, but in that painting, there are these apertures, and so it's a suggestion of a break from the impermeability of the other figures. The surface of all of the figures is meant to seem both protective and brittle. It is a protective surface, but it's clear that it could be permeated at any moment.

AG Do you feel that there's been any element of your process that was a therapeutic act?

SB Sure, every artist is working through some personal issues with their work. I'm no different, the muteness of them...this sounds cheesy, but in some circumstances, I struggle to have a strong sense of self, and I think these figures are trying to invent and protect a self. But I don't think they're unempowered.

Sascha Braunig holds a BFA from the Cooper Union and an MFA from Yale University. Her debut New York solo exhibition at Foxy Production is up through April 30.