

CultureCatch 



GOLDWARP, 2010, Oil on canvas
18.1 x 14 in. / 46 x 35.5 cm.
Courtesy Foxy Production

Head Like a Hole

April 21, 2011
Sascha Braunig
Foxy Production, NYC
Through April 30, 2011

Sascha Braunig's debut solo exhibition at Foxy Production is a quiet, understated affair, in perfect accord with her diminutive, portrait-like paintings. Braunig approaches the practice of the studio portrait from a different angle: she creates imaginary subjects, though rendered with a convincing, surrealist precision. Like the French Academic still-life painter Chardin, Braunig eschews heroic subject matter, concentrating on the simple portrait, rendered life-sized, on small, unframed canvases. And with quite powerful results.

Freud described an "imaginary anatomy," a view of the body, of the self, which originated through subjective perspective of our lived, corporeal experience. The war amputee, for example, whose arm was in continuous pain. The "third sex"—a male body, but the psyche of a woman. In other words, what is in our heads isn't the face we see in the mirror. Braunig toys with this idea by creating imaginary paintings of people who (presumably) don't exist; and, to go one step further, if they do, probably don't look like this: "Lashes" (2011), a head with strips of flesh peeling off like old house paint; "Goldwarp" (2010, above), a profile reminiscent of an Egyptian hieroglyph, though missing the back of its skull, like a head-trauma victim. In these, like all the works here, Braunig fills the canvas with rep patterns, stripes, sequin-like spots, or harlequin diamonds *à la* Picasso. The trippy, op-art patterning lends itself well to the surreal "Goldwarp" -- referencing Magritte and Man Ray -- as well as such other works as "Sequins" (2010) and the gimp head "Chameleon" (2011). In the latter work especially, with its disco-bondage references, the shiny pinspots dancing over the slick

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surface of the canvas put you right in the middle of Studio 54.

Although Braunig has a pitch-perfect eye for fusing a style to a character, the show lists a little to the overcrowded side. Her citations of Magritte, Brauner, de Chirico, and Dalí are best used in two pieces: "Carapace" (2011), a toothy bit of origami with fluorescent orange teeth, clenched vagina dentata-like; and "Coverage" (2010), a spaghetti-head with meatball eye. Here she slyly evokes Picasso's "Harlequin" and Chef Boyardee with humor and wit. There is a childlike simplicity to the equivalences that Braunig makes here that seem genuine, as if these are not simply studio simulacrum portraits, but projected images of her own self. Joseph Beuys wrote about his own work and its tangential relation to his own body perception, "I had to fully reorganize my fundamental constitution; for too long I had been hindered by my body. The initial stage was an orderly phase of renewal. Things inside me had to be totally transplanted. A physical change had to take place.... This was the stage at which I began..." In Beuys's case, the body became fat, or butter, or a potato...a dead hare ready for the pot. In place of decorative patterning, Beuys used camouflage fabric as a pattern. The endlessly scrawled chalkboards recalled children's lessons...and hanging out with Andy was as close to hanging out at Studio 54 as he needed to be. In other words, like Beuys, Magritte, Picasso, et al., Braunig is urged on by the same need to depict her inner cast of characters, as they were. Fortunately for us, they are pretty interesting; hopefully there are understudies in the wings.

- *Bradley Rubenstein*