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reprefantasion

Alex Baker

Fleisher/Ollman

Philadelphia



Kinke Kooi, *The Art of Picking*, 2007, graphite on paper, 24 x 22 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Feature Inc., New York

Reprefantasion presents two pairs of artists: one abstracts the real (Kate Abercrombie and Becky Suss) while the other depicts the unreal (Sarah Gamble and Kinke Kooi), revealing tension and symbiosis between abstraction and representation, reality and fantasy. Representational art is by its very nature abstract because any attempt to represent reality is ultimately an abstraction. Of course, some artists abstract reality more than others—there is a continuum from representation to abstraction with limitless gradations between the two poles—and others still who engage in abstraction without an anchor in realism whatsoever.

In the case of *Reprefantasion*, the artists presented as “abstractors of the real” are not simply realists who de facto take up the position of abstraction through the gesture of painting or drawing the visible, but rather, artists who in some way abstract reality as a means to relate idiosyncratic, often highly personal narratives. Kate Abercrombie and Becky Suss (both Philadelphia-based) demonstrate this tendency. Kate Abercrombie appropriates images from historical and contemporary magazines, family heirlooms, and popular culture and transforms them into hand-painted collages. Becky Suss’ paintings are at first glance realistic, but abstraction undergirds her practice both formally (she loves grids, patterns, and monochromatic surfaces) and conceptually in that the reality she represents is filtered through the gray zone of memory, using her grandparents’ domestic interior as her point of departure.

The other pairing features artists Sarah Gamble and Kinke Kooi who represent fantasy, painting or drawing scenarios that are conjured in the recesses of their minds. They may work representationally—even at times realistically—but the worlds they depict are not our own. Just as “abstracting reality” embraces abstraction and representation simultaneously, “representing fantasy” explores similar terrain. On the one hand, depictions of the unreal can verge on the recognizable, and on the other, representational imagery can meld into abstraction. In an expressionistic, loosely gestural style, Sarah Gamble (Philadelphia) creates unsettling compositions of strange characters of unknown species obscured by abstract webs and mists of spray paint, among other fantastical yet foreboding presentations, many with paranormal overtones. Kinke Kooi (Amsterdam) plays the yin to Gamble’s yang in terms of style; her tightly rendered sexually charged drawings—often realized on pink paper—buzz between confectionery delights (think French macarons) and Surrealist dreamscapes.

Kate Abercrombie



Kate Abercrombie appropriates and transposes images, creating paintings that are fundamentally indebted to the art of collage. Working with vintage magazine covers, contemporary magazine spreads, assorted popular cultural imagery, and representations of meaningful family objects, Abercrombie digests this disparate menagerie into visually complex compositions, distorting her source material through photocopying (manipulating the original as it is being copied on the glass, for example), drawing, and tracing. She then traces the drawings of various images onto artist's paper, infilling the line drawings with her signature medium, gouache. This process of transposition breathes a personality into the culled images that straight collage simply cannot achieve. The resulting compositions subvert our expectations regarding medium, style, period, and technique in painting and drawing. At times resembling Cubist still life as well as other modernist developments of the 20th century like Futurism (Fernand Léger) and Precisionism (Charles Demuth, Ralston Crawford), Abercrombie's intricate paintings also share affinity with the conceptual underpinnings of 1980s postmodern investigations of the image worlds of advertising and entertainment and the marketing of desire.

Kate Abercrombie, *Souvenir*, 2013, gouache on mounted paper, 20 x 15 inches

Given Abercrombie's predisposition throughout her practice for bold color and delineated patterning, it makes sense that she would be drawn to the formal simplicity of 1930s *Fortune* magazine covers that exemplified how modernism could be packaged, distributed, and consumed. *Fortune* illustrators were particularly enamored of the machine aesthetic of Futurism and used it to great effect in cover art that projected themes of progress and wealth accumulation made possible by industrialization and



Kate Abercrombie, *The New Extreme*, 2013, gouache on mounted paper, 20 x 16 inches

standardization. In creating this new body of work, Abercrombie was also drawn to *Holiday* magazine cover art of the 1950 and 60s for its similarly bold aesthetic and the projection of desire and sophistication equated with international travel—a new boom market during the post-World War II era due to the advent of disposal income and the creation of the new leisure class. Both magazines struck zeitgeist chords during their respective time

periods and their visual resonance and encapsulation of national sentiment on a mass scale through iconic design is what attracted Abercrombie to these seminal illustrations.

Abercrombie also personalizes popular culture by integrating images of objects significant to the artist such as souvenir travel spoons from her late grandmother's collection or her late aunt's postcard collection. These gestures make sense alongside the travel themes explored in Abercrombie's *Holiday* magazine transpositions. Abercrombie integrates memory into her retro-modernist visual aesthetic in even more subtle ways as well. The futurist image of the 1964 World's Fair recalls American Precisionism by way of paint by numbers, but it also references Abercrombie's recollections of visits to her grandmother in Yonkers, New York, where the family frequently drove past the World's Fair site, a short distance away in Flushing Meadows.



Kate Abercrombie, *Unisphere 1964*, 2013, Gouache on mounted paper, 14 x 17 inches



Kate Abercrombie, *A Sensibility on Tour*, 2013, Gouache on mounted paper, 20 x 15 1/4 inches

Becky Suss



Becky Suss, *Living Room (Yogi 2)*, 2013, oil on linen, 72 x 96 inches



Becky Suss, *Living Room (blue chair)*, 2013, oil on linen, 50 x 72 inches

While memory is one component of Abercrombie's work, Becky Suss has devoted all of her recent labor to making paintings that are oblique memorials. In her latest series, Suss depicts the interior of her late grandparents' home and the art and décor therein, both real and imagined. Once concerned primarily with painting landscapes, Suss has shifted her focus from outdoors to indoors and from distance to detail. She explores how objects and spaces represent loved ones, but filters these representations through the lens of memory. Both Abercrombie and Suss begin with given realities (an image, an object, or a space) and transform them into personal fictions where reality, as much as it appears their preferred mode of representation, is ultimately beside the point. Suss sees her grandparents' domestic space as a screen on which both she and the viewer may project their own narratives.

The idea of painting as screen is most literally proposed in the largest canvas on view in *Reprefantasion, Living Room (Yogi 2)* (2013), in which a vast expanse of white glazed brick beckons us to superimpose meaning. The flatness of the painting, the manner in which objects seem to levitate in space without shadow or depth, the dog in the foreground, and the sliver of outdoor landscape visible through what is presumably a plate glass window, suggest a setting recalled from memory with inconsistencies and blank spots included. Unbeknownst to the viewer, the objects which

Suss depicts are a combination of real things owned by her grandparents and ones that Suss think make sense in the context of their mid-century Modern interior and which logically follow their collecting focus. The pueblo pot, for instance, is based on a piece that Suss saw at the Barnes Foundation and thought compatible with other Native American objects in her grandparents' collection.

In a small companion painting hanging nearby, Suss has painted a pale gray-and-white Navajo rug that hangs on the same white brick wall we see in the larger painting. The rug is a fabrication that the artist based partially on her grandparents' zeal for Native American objects and partially on her own desire to see a de-saturated textile on a white wall.

As much as they aspire to a certain level of realism, Suss' interior paintings also dissolve into an abstraction of shapes, colors, and patterns. The white brick wall that appears throughout her new body of work shares kinship with the minimalist grid and modern monochrome painting; the small painting, *Navajo Rug* (2013) with its namesake textile, swatch of landscape, and blue pot might just as well be an abstract painting. Suss seems to delight in representing patterns on the Native American pottery featured in her paintings—the vessels transcend their status as objects and become abstract paintings instead. Much has been written about the Abstract Expressionists' embrace of Native American art for its adept use



Becky Suss, *Navajo Rug*, 2013, oil on linen, 14 x 14 inches; *Untitled (various)*, 2013, low-fire ceramic, stoneware, and glaze, dimensions variable

of abstraction as visual language. Suss seems similarly attracted to the potency of Native American abstraction, but is also aware of the cultural politics regarding white, upper-class taste for non-Western art. Suss' exploration of her grandparents' collection reflects a certain coming-to-terms with this politics of desire.

As if rotating her grandparents' art collection, in yet another painted version of their living room, *Living Room (blue chair)* (2013), Suss has chosen to "hang" on the same white wall a painting by William Gropper, an artwork that the family indeed owned by an artist they actually knew. Renowned as a radical cartoonist, muralist, and painter, Gropper often caricatured politicians in the act of legislating, as Suss' copy of the painting demonstrates. Both Suss' grandparents were activists as young people and leftist sympathizers throughout their lives. Suss' grandmother was called to testify in a pretrial hearing before the House Un-American Activities Commission during the McCarthy era regarding her suspected Communist allegiances as a student during the 1930s. The experience was harrowing enough that it prompted the family to change their name from Susselman to Suss, in the hopes of derailing further McCarthyite inquiries.

Suss has also recently begun making small ceramics that are distillations of memory much in the same way that the painted versions of her grandparents' collection are—these are memory objects, not exact replicas. In the case of the ceramics, it appears as if they have escaped the canvas and have morphed into three dimensions. The installation of the objects on the floor underneath the paintings inflects the presentation with the sensibility of an offering or an altar honoring deceased ancestors.



Sarah Gamble



Sarah Gamble, *Lil' magic mirror*, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12 inches

Sarah Gamble synthesizes representation and abstraction creating paintings of worlds where energy is made visible and characters—some vaguely human, others more animal—co-exist in unsettling environments. Gamble's gestural, expressionistic style, the ease with which she moves around paint, and her willingness to engage different media, like spray paint and oil pastel, enable her to create the otherworldly moods that her bizarre subjects inhabit. In Gamble's paintings, narrative cohesion is suggested by recognizable elements—a dog, a face, an animal, a textile—but is always just out of reach by her tendency to disguise, obliterate, or radically juxtapose these things, thereby discombobulating our ability to make meaning.

Several of her recent works prove all the more confounding in that they appear to be paintings of art works—portrait paintings and paintings of animated textiles—each bordered by a trompe l'oeil frame or delineated by a painted perimeter. The portraits are oddly unsettling, vaguely

suggesting the Fayum mummy portraits of the Egyptian Roman period (1st through 4th century AD) in the way Gamble depicts a frontal view of a face within an edged background. But her subjects are obscured by a disquieting atmosphere and never coalesce into the recognizably human. These paintings of paintings could just as easily be read as portals into other dimensions; the faces might be those of aliens or ghosts. Or are they mirrored reflections, a play on the age-old question of painting as window or mirror? The obscuring of faces re-occurs throughout Gamble's recent work and reaches its zenith in several paintings where only eyes peer out through veils of pattern. These presentations of what we might assume are levitating textiles suggests magic flying carpets or veils hiding the features of presumably female subjects. Another painting in the exhibition also explores the theme of veiling, but in this case the obscuring element is not a rectilinear object, but a more amorphous and sinister form, visceral and red in disposition, enveloping a group of characters peering through skeins of red lattice.

At times, Gamble chooses to depict groups of characters in more visible registers. In one painting, a strange assembly of faces resembles a group portrait of motley exiles from far-off galaxies or animal kingdoms. Here, facial features come into full view, but abstract radiant energy bursts and a haze of acrylic wash and spray paint makes it difficult to fully decipher exactly what or who these creatures are. While Gamble's work refuses easy interpretation, it finds a ready context within the history

Sarah Gamble, *Untitled*, 2013, acrylic on paper, 19 x 24 inches



of art. There is an obvious kinship with Surrealism and the landscape of dreams and the unconscious. Her "group portraits" of odd characters recall the compositions of the late-19th century artist, James Ensor, who was noted for depictions of unruly mobs of clowns, masked protagonists, and despicable humanity in general. In terms of recent painting there is some similarity to the grotesquely realized characters of George Condo, or the expressionistic and unsettling figuration of Dana Schutz.



Sarah Gamble, *Untitled*, 2012, acrylic and spray paint on paper, 19 x 24 inches



Sarah Gamble, *Untitled*, 2013, acrylic on panel, 24 x 16 inches

Kinke Kooi



While Gamble represents the otherworldly with a loose spontaneity, Kinke Kooi chooses deliberate and controlled means to conjure realms of the unreal: exacting draftsmanship executed in graphite, ink, and acrylic paint that conjure both Old Master and Hans Bellmer drawings. Kooi's drawings are overtly fantastical, but careful viewing leads us into what we might presume are oblique autobiographical narratives and commentary on gender identity. Many begin with a pink, painted paper support, a tongue-in-cheek appropriation of a color typically associated with the feminine.

In *Searching for Support* (2010), using negative space, Kooi has created a frontal silhouette of a woman who is engaged in strange behavior and surrounded by the obsolete trappings and tropes of the feminine (yarn, pin cushions, wombs, vulvas). The ghostly female form feeds worms to hatchlings in a nest while also offering a tiny bird to a rat who pokes out of a void of swirling graphite (Is Kooi playing with the stereotype of the female nurturer? What kind of female nurtures both birds and rats?). She tramples booklets at her feet with titles (in Dutch)

like "Purity," "Progress," "Profit," "Truth" and squashes a tiny soldier holding a sword. Folded within the quilted graphite recesses of the composition are cozy domestic scenes, mating serpents, a dog nursing her litter, variations on still-life arrangements, and cake-like confections that resemble breasts. Pearls make appearances in oysters but are also nestled into flesh. The vignettes are sometimes framed by frilly lacework or heavy, Victorian curtain fabric, and in other instances are cuddled by wombs or organ structures, drawn with the accuracy of vintage, medical textbook illustration. From the still-life composition at bottom left, a ball of yarn unravels creating an intestine-like chain that culminates in what appears to be mutant, exaggerated female genitalia. Cryptic, tiny handwritten statements are tucked into the various folds represented in the drawing or along its margins. These range from commentary on gender relations and the trap that female artists might find themselves in ("content is for girls," "business is for girls") to love ("the balance between love and reason," "feel the power of love") to declarative empowerment ("stop rape").

Similar to *Searching for Support* in its representation of visceral forms, *The Oracle* (2012) appears as if Kooi has drawn the opened abdomen of a humanoid creature, exposing internal organs and gestating creatures. A ball of yarn unravels and morphs into an umbilical cord that branches in several directions, one which feeds an early-stage fetus. The other branch of the cord meanders between organs and then exits into negative space where it meets the blades of a scissor. Kooi's representation of the umbilical cord vacillates between handiwork decoration (note the beads that the cord passes through) and glistening, blood-swollen flesh, again seemingly playing with gender stereotypes of the female as crafter/breeder. Like *Searching for Support*, *The Oracle* also features pithy statements buried in the composition, this time in English.

Other Kooi works in *Reprefantasion* present similar organic and sexualized forms that inhabit the in-between spaces of fantasy, narrative, abstraction, and representation. Kooi moves away from the swirls of graphite and sexualized organ motifs and presents a brooding urban evening scene in *Flower Girl* (2009). In the midst of housing projects and barbed wire fencing, a singular beacon of illumination in the form of a modern glass apartment building sits steadfast in the night. Houseplants appear in windows contrasting with the lifeless landscape. But the most pronounced source of energy in the composition is the anthropomorphization of the building itself, which sprouts long, wispy hair decorated with flowers and pearly ornaments suggesting a pre-Raphaelite Ophelia; several flowers have seemingly migrated to a dormant tree, further animating the desolate landscape.

Kooi's carefully rendered, sexually suggestive drawings are reminiscent of Hans Bellmer's drawings as well as the drawings of Unica Zürn,

Kinke Kooi, *Searching for Support*, 2010, acrylic, graphite, colored pencil, marker on paper, 39 7/8 x 26 inches. Courtesy the artist and Feature Inc., New York



Kinke Kooi, *The Oracle*, 2012, acrylic paint, graphite on paper, 37 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Feature Inc., New York

Bellmer's wife. Bellmer was most famous for photographs of dismembered and oddly articulated doll sculptures that became icons of Surrealism.¹ He later turned to drawings of tangled limbs that dissolve into biomorphic abstraction—ambiguous yet violently sexual imagery. Zürn, a subject of Bellmer's photographs of the 1950s (nude and bound with tape), was an accomplished artist in her own right and similarly predisposed toward the psycho-sexual, drawing bizarre creatures, mask-like self-portraits, and otherworldly plant forms. Kooi's drawings resonate with Zürn's in their mutual depiction of imaginary, interior worlds. Both share an affinity for blending the recognizable with the entirely fabricated, creating works that fluctuate between representation and abstraction. Interestingly, they have also used the color pink in their palette as a ground, as well as texts buried within their compositions. However, Zürn's drawings appear more extemporaneous than Kooi's as Zürn followed the methodology of Surrealist automatism. Still, there was always a place for Old Master-inspired technique within Surrealism. Like Yves Tanguy, Kay Sage, and Salvador Dali, Kooi synthesizes the Surrealist strategy of spontaneous expressionism with an academic attention to meticulous rendering.

Kinke Kooi, *Flower Girl*, 2009, Acrylic point on paper, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Feature Inc., New York



Acknowledgments

Fleisher/Ollman thanks all of the artists for participating in *Reprefantasion* and is additionally grateful to Hudson of Feature Inc., New York, for consigning Kinke Kooi's works. A special thanks to Kate Abercrombie and Claire Iltis for initial conversations that inspired this exhibition. Our staff at the gallery was instrumental as always: Justin Webb, Preparator, for framing and installation; Matthew Lucash, Bookkeeper, for art work pickup; and Claire Iltis, Associate Director, for the design and editing of the publication and the design of the poster invitation. Finally, a special acknowledgment to John Ollman, for believing in the principle of experimentation in the making of exhibitions—a cornerstone of our mission at the gallery.

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Published in conjunction with the exhibition:

Reprefantasion

Kate Abercrombie
Sarah Gamble
Kinke Kooi
Becky Suss

December 13, 2013–February 1, 2014
Fleisher/Ollman

Design: Claire Iltis
Printing: Fireball

ISBN: 978-0-9815048-3-4

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