

NEW YORK OBSERVER

Diogenes as Collagist: Robert Feintuch at Sonnabend Gallery; Kate Shepherd at Galerie Lelong

By Will Heinrich
Published April 5, 2011

For the next few weeks, the painter Robert Feintuch will be slouching around the walls of the Sonnabend Gallery. Using himself as a model, Mr. Feintuch paints a single male figure wearing only white boxer shorts, usually alone but sometimes doubled or tripled. He stands in front of a blank wall in an exaggerated shade of his own Caucasian color—gray, peach or pink. He raises a bunch of grapes over his mouth, or raises his arm without the grapes, or swings a club, or screams at himself.

He is man as a messy collage, alive, but still mostly clay. *In the Studio* shows him facing the viewer, but with his head, right leg and left arm all attached backward. His right arm is raised over his head, either holding his invisible grapes, or else maybe the string from which he's twirling. (There is no God; we create ourselves.) He casts overlapping shadows on the wall. To match the stubborn blankness of the back of his head, he has neither nipples nor a navel. In *Taking a Stand*, we look at the artist's back as he looks up at the empty wall and his shadow, cast low and to the right, seems to look up at him. A chair dangles from his hand. Where can he go? He's a man without direction.

In *Thinking*, we can finally see the figure's face, and his legs are facing us, too. But he isn't complete. His legs below the shorts have shadows the color of car exhaust and are as seamless and smooth as an airbrushed hood. But the chair that hangs from his hand is missing its seat, and his chest hasn't been filled in—it's still the blank color of the mindless wall behind it. His feet, too, need a few more steps before they finish. This is man as a process, not an essence.

What do you call a directionless collage without intelligence or essence? A collection of forms that neither clash nor cohere, but just kind of lean together, moving ahead in a series of accidents? The answer is in *Protest*, where several iterations of our man crowd into the left half of the canvas, moving up and away, overlapping. One arm raises the Dionysian grapes, but four others raise fists. What do you call it? You call it a mob.

But if Mr. Feintuch is a cynic about human nature—or the making of art, or the nature of truth, or the possibility of beauty—he is, fortunately, almost as funny as Diogenes. Sometimes, as in *Late Marriage*, the humor can be cartoonish: Our man crouches over a dead or sleeping mate in a plume of smoke. But sometimes jokes are deadly: The naked hero of *Pink Hercules* is the color of Pepto-Bismol. He leans his burdensome bulk on a crutch and carries a club stolen from a Feiffer cartoon. Who knows what hell he's about to raise? We know, at least, that he doesn't.

“And Debris,” a show of new paintings and sculptures by Kate Shepherd at Galerie Lelong, made me think of Edison's quadruplex telegraph. It was one of the first to send multiple messages simultaneously over a single line. Thin white lines form figures like architectural diagrams that float over shiny, monochrome panels painted with enamel in careful horizontal strokes. These diagrams are weighted at the bottom, as if to keep the colors from floating away, or move narrowly up the middle, creating depth. But they only create depth if you look at the figures first. If you start with the colors—some of them are like elegant, hyper-real candy; others are like the deep, dark walls of a New England fishing village—the lines seem overshadowed, perhaps even unnecessary.

Multiple signals are transmitted more effectively by the sculpture. Ms. Shepherd dismantled ordinary coat hangers with pliers, reassembled them by threes and fives in pinched and folded-over ovals, and hung them from the ceiling. In a small but magical touch of alchemy, the leftover little twists and turns of their factory

shapes give the otherwise rigid wire the trembling, dynamic quality of hand-drawn lines. (These, too, could have escaped from Mr. Feiffer, or from a late William Steig cartoon.) *Hanging Wire D #16*, a gourdlike shape, is a window in the air, and the pinched mandorla of #9 is like an artist's idea of a psychoanalyst's idea of an electrician's idea of the origin of the universe. Hung in long rows, these wires look most like sketches, two-and-a-half-dimensional enclosures of empty space. Seen alone, I suspect they would reverse themselves to form, instead of windows, solid shapes. But whichever dimension you notice first, both possibilities are there: A good line can do two things at once.