

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Allison Schulnik: *Hobo Clown #4*, 2008, oil on canvas, 84 by 68 inches; at Mike Weiss.

ALLISON SCHULNIK MIKE WEISS

One thing you can say for Allison Schulnik: she's seriously into paint. The young L.A. artist's New York solo debut included 13 canvases, nearly all dated 2008, on which she mounds her oils like cupcake icing. Great gobs bedeck her curdled, very funny riffs on the portrait, still life and landscape genres. "Impasto" is an insufficient term; School of London paintslingers like Leon Kossof and Frank Auerbach look timid in comparison.

Schulnik is also into lowbrow taste, to judge from the mawkish conventions of her pathetic portraits. *Hobo Clown #3* is one of several paintings depicting a down-at-the-heels jester of uncertain gender who sports a striped muffler, flowered bowler and enormous boutonniere. An adoring little terrier is this lonesome soul's sole companion in a desolate world beneath a dark cloud. Neurosis yields to psychosis in the 6-foot-high *Big Hobo Clown Head*, an extreme closeup in which meaty blossoms and death-mask greasepaint meld in over-the-top paint application.

The pinup tradition turns toxic in *Girl with Animal #2*, in which a bodacious, wide-mouthed blonde assumes the slinky squat of a sexual predator and offers her rosy ass to the crouching tiger behind her; both creatures regard the viewer with something like alarm. *Flowers for Hobo Clown #1* is a tousled bouquet studded with alizarin, vermilion and bubble-gum pink, crinkled clots and dried-up goo. Proving that she can do understatement, too, the artist sneaks in a few oblique streaks of gray at the bottom of the painting, establishing the vase's cast shadow on the tabletop and rooting the object in illusionistic space. It's a Manet moment in a body of work that owes more to Nolde and Ensor.

Also on view were eight smallish glazed ceramic sculptures, many of which rested on the floor. Some might be auditioning superheroes: though grotesquely low-waisted, *Gold Green Man* is massively muscled and prodigiously endowed; *1/3 Gold Nipple Man* seems to have sunk into the floor up to his pectorals. Early evidence of Schulnik's interest in the comparative morphology of face and flower was present in *Hobo Clown*, a 3½-minute claymation video from 2000. The subject, perhaps a distant cousin of Walter Williams's long-suffering Mr. Bill, invites disaster by gathering wildflowers. Like her near-contemporaries Jim Drain and Rosson Crow, flamboyant artists with goth/romantic inclinations and a flair for the ironically uncouth, Schulnik has set her career off to an auspicious start. How long she can retool kitsch at this fever pitch is another question, but for the moment her light burns bright.

—Stephen Maine

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