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Portrait of the Artist As a Young Tangle of Wire: Sascha Braunig's Otherworldly Works



“It could be a decoration, or it could be a *problem*,” said Sascha Braunig, discussing the varied textures — pearlescent, tubular, blemishlessly smooth — that cover, absorb, and occasionally dominate the humanoid figures in her paintings. “There’s a relationship to fashion — the way we decorate ourselves, and how it has become excessive — but these surface patterns become organic to me.” Braunig has a suite of new small- and medium-scale paintings a Foxy Production in New York, on view through April 18, as well as work in the Bob Nickas-curated “The Painter of Modern Life,” at Anton Kern through April 11, and in the New Museum’s “Surround Audience” triennial. Most of these paintings are, according to Braunig, a mutation of the self-portraiture genre — “they’re about me,” she explained, and the deconstructed figures “are all sort of stand-ins” for the artist herself.

That’s not to say that you’d ever recognize Braunig herself in the works; representations of the human form are pared-down to their essence, a question of basic form and silhouette. (In “Hide,” the body is conceived as a kind of loose plastic mesh hanging from pins.) Braunig’s process begins with the creation of figures and faces using modeling clay. “I like working from observation because it provides a physical sense of light and three-dimensionality,” she said, the goal being “to achieve that sense of materiality and palpability.” While most of the artist’s models are abandoned or occasionally repurposed for new paintings, one mask — cast in bronze, though it still retains its handmade-with-clay feel — hangs suspended from the ceiling in Foxy Production’s back gallery.

Despite their origin in the real world of her studio in Portland, Maine, Braunig’s compositions — like those of Avery Singer, another painter included in the New Museum’s triennial — have an aura of digital rendering. (Braunig’s characterization of her often all-over patterning as a type of “skin” also chimes nicely with the

same terminology used in the context of 3-D animation software.) Interestingly, it's the artist's reliance on common clay, she surmises, that might provide that computer-assisted sheen. "The only thing I'm really observing is light and shadow" on the modeling material," she said. "There's not a lot of texture — and that's what's similar to early 3-D animation, or crude computer-rendering 101."

Certain interesting tensions are at play in Braunig's paintings. There is, of course, the conflicting desire to be seen and to disappear, what the artist characterizes as an oscillating interest between "fleshy corporeality and an extremely hollowed-out dematerialization of the body." The paintings read as a visual manifestation of an anxiety over the outside getting in; of the elimination of that membrane between the self and the world. Pattern and texture complicates the matter. "Pattern functions as a kind of decoration, but also an armor, an impermeable or permeable layer," she said, discussing one small tondo painting in which a human figure is nearly completely subsumed by abstract signs. "It's about keeping the gaze out — and inviting it, at the same time. Definitely inviting it." Braunig is also working through her own relationship to the physical limitations of the canvas: "If you think about painting seriously, you end up thinking about the formality and the rigidity of this rectangular confine: this is where all my work takes place," she said. "It's hard not to see it as a really important boundary." In the past, she's addressed those limitations by hanging several paintings on a sculptural screen whose surface replicates and expands, in a tactile sense, the surface patterning in the two-dimensional works. Sometimes the figures themselves seem anxious to escape. Braunig noted the painting "Hilt" at Foxy Production, which depicts a purple-hued figure (its hands realistic depictions of the artist's own; its upper torso an otherworldly bulbous blob) attempting to literally climb through the bars of a window frame or jail cell that are congruent with the painting's own borders.

And despite the obvious nods to Surrealism and a fondness for biomorphic slipperiness à la Yves Tanguy — not to mention the way these portraits can read as strangely festooned digital avatars — Braunig's ambition is more classically inspired. "I would love to be able to make a painting like Van Eyck or Holbein," she said, "but since that's not really possible, I'm instead aiming for a situation where the viewer might have a similar one-to-one encounter with another figure. Though in my case that figure is distorted or inhuman, and so the experience is slightly uncanny."