

ARTFORUM

Sascha Braunig

FOXY PRODUCTION

One of the drawbacks of having been an art critic for a long time is that you sometimes forget what decade you're standing in. When I walked into Sascha Braunig's recent exhibition, her third in New York but the first I've seen, I imagined for a moment that I was back in the 1980s—specifically, in that brief interregnum between neo-expressionism and neo-geo, when what was called neo-Surrealism was the rage, and artists

such as Will Mentor, Peter Schuyff, and Tishan Hsu seemed ubiquitous. Their work was typically a curiously manneristic amalgam of organicism, geometry, and Op illusion—a sort of abstract uncanny.

Braunig's work would have fit into that trend with ease. A painting such as *Troll*, 2014, illustrates this: On one level, it's a pure exercise in color control, in which the artist uses phylloid patterning and a palette limited to yellow and periwinkle to construct a clear figure-ground dichotomy in which the figure is the head—not of the gnarled little fellow of Nordic folklore mentioned in the title, or his contemporary descendant, the abusive prowler of the Internet, but rather of something more like a sci-fi monster with a sealed vertical mouth and only the shadows of eyes. Similarly, in *Hilt*, 2015, a three-color system—lavender, yellow, and turquoise—is used to



Sascha Braunig,
Troll, 2014, oil on
linen over panel,
15 × 12".

limn a bizarre, polka-dotted, and seemingly single-legged female alien leaning mournfully over a balcony. The paintings are genuinely strange, but the strangeness inheres not so much in their imagery as in its technical execution.

Though Braunig's modus operandi brought back memories, she is also very much an artist of this moment, a fact attested to by her inclusion in Bob Nickas's excellent group show at Anton Kern Gallery, "The Painter of Modern Life"—an apt if probably inadvertent riposte to the limp exhibition "The Forever Now" at the Museum of Modern

Art, New York—as well as in the New Museum’s “2015 Triennial: Surround Audience.” Perhaps her appearance in these exhibitions is an illustration of Nickas’s contention that “movements belong to the past, and surely for the best. History will not be rushed along.”

True enough. But it gives pause that the neo-Surrealism of the ’80s had such effect and then fizzled out so quickly. It lacked staying power, I’d suggest, because its mysteries quickly came to seem so facile. Might not Braunig’s work be subject to the same fate? Well, my job description is critic, not prophet. But my inclination in Braunig’s case is to think that she seems actually capable of succeeding at what the neo-Surrealists merely attempted. Her paintings are technically sweet—to borrow J. Robert Oppenheimer’s notorious phrase—but there is a weight of reality within the cleverness and bizarrerie. It was an interesting surprise to discover that she typically paints from three-dimensional models that she builds—one of these, a face made of loops of clay and titled *Chur*, 2014/2015, was cast in bronze and included in the show—and that in this way she is also a kind of realist: Her work is umbilically tied to the empirical world it might at first seem to refute or deride. Painting ultimately involves a question of belief, not in what we see, but in what we feel. At least some of Braunig’s paintings carry palpable feeling. In *Hide*, 2015, what might be a skein of plastic netting could also be (as the title suggests) an animal or perhaps even human skin full of holes stretched across a shallow box. The work’s evident artifice maintains this ambiguity—and the ambiguity keeps the somewhat painful sensation evoked by the image alive while fending off any too-exaggerated pathos. It’s hard not to believe in it.

—Barry Schwabsky