

ARTNEWS

SASCHA BRAUNIG ENTERS THE VOID: A Q&A

Sascha Braunig's immaculately rendered paintings seem to exist in their own optical universe. She paints portraits, but only in the most expansive set of that term—"Ur-characters, blanks" is how she describes her subjects. As patterns hum in the background, humanoid elements emerge from fluid ripples of lines, strings, diamond checks, plaids, and herringbones in pinks and greens, orange and blacks, and yellows and blues. Sometimes the figures are jumping-off points from which new designs unfurl, radiating over and obfuscating that trippy backdrop.

Braunig, who was trained at Cooper Union and Yale, is included in current New Museum triennial, and just opened her third show at New York's Foxy Production, which runs through April 18, and includes a new batch of her typically ingenious paintings, in which the senses take precedence over physical laws of nature, time is irrelevant, and where, instead of living, one simply exists. Over brunch one Sunday when Braunig was in New York (she lives in Portland, Maine), I spoke with her about obsession, transcendence, and film.

ARTnews: Why does painting appeal to you over other mediums?

Braunig: I think it's the focus and attention that's required. It sounds a bit corny, but I feel that attention—my own, and other people's—is just so scattered that painting is a really good meditative process for me at this point. It's also a relationship with a material. I've experimented with video and sculpture and other media, but mostly painting is what provides that intense focus for me. It's a kind of journey for me, to play with materials that you can't go back and undo.



Valance (2014/15) by Sascha Braunig
COURTESY FOXY PRODUCTION



Sascha Braunig's *Untitled (Icy Spicy)*, 2011.
COURTESY FOXY PRODUCTION

On your website, you have a single sample painting for each year, from 2009 to 2013. Your paintings seem to have become simpler and more magnified—would you agree?

I think that's accurate. In the beginning, I was really engaged with traditional still-life painting, so I was making these models and painting them really carefully under observation. There was a one-to-one relationship between me and the model I was painting, and I think the hyperrealistic style of painting reflects that. I've started to incorporate the environment more, though, and I'm also inventing more—it creates a different feeling. So [my paintings have] become somewhat more idealized or stylized—I mean, you know it was always stylized.

Are you a perfectionist?

Yeah. I'm not a gestural painter, and I've grown to accept that about myself. There's not a lot of surprise from my perspective—I mean, I go for a different type of surprise and release in my work, but my process isn't uncontrolled. The process is actually very controlled and I guess in that way I'm similar to a graphic artist or someone who uses a computer program—not that I use lasers or anything, but there's a sketch that I transfer to a canvas. Things end up changing, but my paintings don't change a lot from my original conception.

Do you know when a painting is finished?

I have that problem of not knowing when to stop, though I think I'm developing a good instinct for stopping. Maybe that's why the paintings seem simpler. But then again, I'm making more complex backgrounds now so there is that all-over busyness to them.

Because your paintings are so similar in style, I wonder if there's some kind of obsession that motivates you? Or is there a concept that you feel you haven't mastered yet?

That's a good question. I think there's an element I haven't reached yet...it sounds so hokey to say that there's always room for improvement, but there are so many variations on the painting language that I feel I can be involved in for a long time. The paintings seem similar, but I'm actually working out small differences. Things like the frame and background and the position are things that ironically I don't feel like I learned how to negotiate in art school, because art school is not necessarily about learning the little things. So I feel like I'm still learning to paint and I could keep working on that for a long time. But that's not to say that my aesthetic won't change as the world changes.

I've heard your work described as both realistic and surrealistic. Which do you think is the better description?

They're realist in painting style, in the same way that Dalí was trained as a realist painter. There are elements of realism in the way things look. But I think they're fantastical—I don't necessarily think they're Surrealist in a classical sense. Surrealism is something I'm always negotiating, but I'm more interested in the peripheries of Surrealism and artists like Magritte who weren't high surrealists but outsiders. The goals underneath my paintings are also totally different from Surrealist goals. Conceptually, Surrealists were kind of journeying into the self, whereas I'm more interested in the dispersal of the self.

You've said that you are inspired by films like Enter the Void and David Cronenberg's movies. Do you think your paintings are transcendent in the same way?

I would love it if my work is transcendent in that way, but I don't know if they necessarily are.

Your work often has the feel of an optical illusion—it makes you dizzy, like a glitch in the space-time continuum.

I'll take that. In terms of David Cronenberg, I'm more interested in his early work more than what he's done more recently—mostly the clinical quality he takes toward his subject. But I think that's in lots of art these days.

You've also spoken of the Northern Renaissance painters with admiration. Do you appreciate extreme detail?

I don't know if I'm interested in going in that direction, but the Flemish painters are definitely my imagined ancestors.

Yeah, Arcimboldo is definitely your ancestor.

I'm more interested in detail in 17th-century Dutch painting in that, back then, it was a competition for other luxury goods. Painting was in the same plane as ceramics and jewelers, so they tried to be more ornate or as ornate as all the other collectibles. That stuff is kind of my go-to room in any historical museum. It's super real, more than realist paintings.

Do you think of the figures you paint as being alive, or conscious of their surroundings? Or are they just the foundation of the patterns that then grow around them?

I was just thinking about this. I don't think of them as being distinct characters—more as subjects or Ur-characters, blanks. They're stand-ins for how I feel. I think they're alive, but I like the ambiguity of that feeling between sentience and death.

I think they look alive, and hopeful in a way.

I'm glad you think so. I think that I do play with an uncanny aesthetic, but I hope that my work is not just playing with dead things. I hope it does mesh with something real in the world.