

Alien Forms: ‘Cosmicomics’ at Frosch&Portmann

by Thomas Micchelli on July 25, 2015



Ye Qin Zhu, “Without colors” (2014), dried orange, paraffin wax, crayon, a painting scrap, 7 x 5 x 2 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Italo Calvino’s *Cosmicomics*, first published in 1968, is a collection of twelve tales — most of them narrated by an ancient, improbable being by the name of Qfwfq — that blend science fiction with fantasy and indulge in the mind-expanding ethos of the times.

[*Cosmicomics*](#), a group show at Frosch&Portmann on the Lower East Side, may or may not have much to do with the book, but its phantasmagoric imagery, juiced-up color, material inventiveness and abrupt shifts in scale make the title a good fit nonetheless.



Ellen Siebers, “Untitled” (2015), oil/marble, ground/birch panel, 18 x 18 inches (click to enlarge)

Calvino, like his colleagues in the Oulipo group of experimental writers, reveled in formalist games, as in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), a novel he composed in the form of opening chapters from fictitious books. The conceit behind *Cosmicomics* is that each chapter begins with a short, factual (or fancifully scientific) topic, such as the sun’s orbit around the galaxy or the exact moment of the Big Bang, and the story that follows becomes a riff on that.

This sort of gamesmanship is not clearly in evidence in the work in *Cosmicomics*, the exhibition; rather, the curator, Vicki Sher (who is also one of the artists), draws upon the less cerebral aspects of Calvino’s style, as she writes in her curatorial statement:

The artists in this show are not particularly interested in science, science fiction, or astronomy—or maybe they are, it was never discussed, but they have been chosen for a common sensibility. Their work shares an interest in human emotion, otherworldly beauty, and a sense of humor. Calvino’s voice, candid and humble, sentimental and romantic, playful and funny, is alive in these drawings, paintings and sculpture that use concrete experience as a jumping-off point for amused imaginative play.



Katherine Bradford, “Black Pink Superhero” (2015), gouache on handmade paper, 14 x 11 inches (click to enlarge)

The result is a selection of work that is by and large as buoyant and trippy as Katherine Bradford’s “Black Pink Superhero” (2015), a black-caped, black-booted character in a pink leotard, catapulted into a pale blue sky. A border of scarlet gouache runs along the image’s bottom edge, which has the effect of solidifying the piece’s handmade paper support into a sculptural object.

Blurring the distinctions between two- and three-dimensional artworks is a recurrent motif of the exhibition. Ellen Siebers’ untitled Minimalist abstraction from 2015 is an 18 x 18-inch gray square on a birch panel, with a blade-like buildup of paint (mixed with marble) that juts in from the left edge toward the center. The work is a painting, a drawing (the contours of the blade trace a filament-thin line around its shape) and a bas-relief, several identities residing in one.

David Finn’s powerful “Weight” from 2013, a work in charcoal and shoe-polish-brown acrylic on a sheet of Tyvek (the ubiquitous polyethylene water barrier wrapped around new construction) that has been afflicted with innumerable folds and wrinkles. The texture of the surface disruptions lends the image — a network of swelling biomorphic shapes that looks like a space alien standing at attention — a three-dimensional presence, as the scattered light glancing off its glossy surface adds a layer of evanescence to the painting’s willfully awkward forms and brackish color.



David Finn, “Weight” (2013), acrylic and charcoal on Tyvek, 40 x 30 inches

Daniel Wiener’s multi-colored works in Apoxie-Sculpt combine elements of sculpture, painting and process art. His wall-mounted, mask-like “We Go To Their Faltering” (2014) is an amalgam of colored bands (white, green, orange, purple and ecru) that are fashioned into a puckered surface, which is thrust forward from an arching, mostly black shape behind it, and adorned with fanged protrusions along the bottom edge. Its sci-fi/horror vibe invokes the kind of monstrous life forms that have been imagined floating around the cosmos, as well as the monsters floating around the deepest levels of the ocean, where life on Earth most likely began.

The hybridity continues with Jay Henderson’s “Disk” (2009–14), a roughly textured tondo made from hot glue, aluminum, wood and acrylic, whose silvery iciness brings to mind the New Horizons photos of Pluto, and “Roof” (2008–15), made from hot glue, found plastics, wood and paint. Resembling a cross between a pig and a scaled-down hut, it includes a hidden electric bulb that sets its translucent shell aglow with shades of blue, white, yellow and salmon-pink, fusing sculpture and painting with architecture and light art.



Daniel Wiener, “We Go To Their Faltering” (2014), apoxie-Sculpt, 11 x 11 x 5 inches

There are also according-to-Hoyle paintings and sculptures in the show, works that don’t necessarily cross boundaries but hold their own in their chosen categories. They include curator Sher’s loosely geometric abstraction in black ink, white gesso, and pink and green acrylic (“Little Prince,” 2015), and Grant Huang’s self-descriptive, whimsically surrealist “Two Cats, White Melon, Moon” (2015).



Sasha Pichushkin, “Untitled” (2014), oil on canvas, 3.5 x 3.1 inches (click to enlarge)

The untitled purple-and-red abstraction from 2014 by Sasha Pichushkin, a self-taught painter born in Orel, Russia, is tiny — only 3.5 inches across and 3.1 inches high — but it packs a punch. The textures of the purple strokes of paint are so dense and knotty that they seem to peel off the red field behind it. On the same wall, a similarly sized abstraction (3.5 x 3.5 inches) hangs beside a larger one (15.7 x 11.8 inches). Both are untitled and were made this year, and each feature downward-thrusting botanical forms resembling cherries on a stem. The smaller canvas is in deep purple and green on white, with smudges of pink, and the larger one is uniformly dark, with shadowy blues, blacks and grays over a field of umber, which is relieved by a rust-colored, quasi-diamond shape sliced into the lower right corner. They make a formidable pair.



Ye Qin Zhu, “All at one point” (2015), paraffin wax, dried grapefruit peel, sawdust, houseflies, fruit flies, spiders, roly polies, horntails, wasps, wasp nest, rubber band, chrysanthemum, cooked potato, dimensions variable, 7 x 7 x 5 inches (click to enlarge)

The sculptures of Ye Qin Zhu, who was born in Toishan, China, and currently lives and works in Queens, are laid out on a shelf along the sill of the gallery’s front window. They are evocatively lumpen forms that bring to mind protozoa, fungi, geodes and coral. The artist’s technique is straightforward — covering items from everyday life in wax, including cut-up strips from old paintings, a piece of black crochet, sawdust, chrysanthemums, houseflies and wasps, a cooked potato and a dried orange, and then using them to build layer upon layer of color and texture — a multifarious approach to Jasper John’s dictum to take an object, do something to it, and then do something else to it. These are remarkably assured and eerily beautiful works that embrace the embalming nature of the wax to create oozing, wriggling, bulging, eruptive forms, a kind of alpha and omega, recycling life out of death. Calvino would be pleased.

Cosmicomics continues at Frosch&Portmann (53 Stanton Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 1.