

← Back to Original Article

ART

History Embedded in the Paint

'My work begins at excess and takes off from there,' says painter Keith Sklar, who blends history, pop culture and whimsy into his elaborate works.

March 22, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

'Painting is a geezer art form,' says Keith Sklar. "With painting, most people hit their stride in their early 40s through their 70s. That's prime-time and historically normal. Even though I've been painting for 20 years, I feel like it took just that long to develop the chops and the courage, to be confident enough as an artist to paint something I'm deeply involved with."

At 41, Sklar hardly seems a geezer. His short, dark hair may be receding a bit, but his conversation is rich with wise-cracking humor--a legacy, he says, of his Long Island upbringing. His studio, the garage of his Mount Washington home, is crowded with canvases so thickly encrusted with paint that it proves a challenge to decipher their amalgamation of art history and popular culture. His second exhibition at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery opens Saturday.

"Here I am in this garage, which irritates me, but I'm painting well in it. I'm letting go of the image of the artist lifestyle and just working. I made my first small paintings, about 16 by 20 inches, but I felt it was the first monumental work I ever did." Those canvases attracted Felsen as well as the New York gallery P.P.O.W., both of which gave him shows last year.

"My work begins at excess and takes off from there," admits Sklar. "But it is very democratic in that you have everything from Disney to Vermeer, from John Singer Sargent to Anselm Kiefer. It's all part of our heads now; all images are in the mix."

"Valencia," the title of Sklar's show, incorporates many of the historic figures and events chronicled in a commercial mural that he was commissioned to paint in 1981 for a shopping mall at the Valencia Town Center. He was struck by his patrons' corporate interpretation of local history, which demanded that his mural include images ranging from conquistadors to Native Americans, from a prize-winning steer to the Magic Mountain roller coaster.

Sklar supported himself for 15 years by painting realist-style murals like that one, and his recent paintings are a method of revisiting his own personal history as well as examining the complicated legacies of history painting.

"You have a false history created for people who visit this mall, and you have my own revisionist history," he explains with a laugh. "I wanted to walk through my own experience of being an artist who has done commercial work to float the real work. I also wanted to paint from the wonderful iconic subjects in the mural, like the silent-film star William S. Hart or Henry Mayo Newhall, which Newhall is named after. There are aspects of being a man and an artist that have to do with being an entrepreneur, with being a mythic loner, the way cowboys are. There were all these things to tap into that I allowed to happen in the work."

I loved the idea of doing history paintings from a history that didn't exist."

For example, one canvas features a portrait of a Native American man with long braided hair and striped shirt. But the image is overlaid with an erotically entwined East Indian couple and the viscous surface of the picture is embedded with a squashed latex relief of toy cowboys and Indians. However, none of this is immediately evident upon looking at the painting. The imagery seems lost underneath the sturdy buildup of oil and acrylic color.

"I'm excited to rediscover the physicality of paint," says Sklar. "The technique is collage-less collage. All the relief is made out of paint, which is important to me. I call them reverse trompe l'oeil. The paintings seem to force separation between image and relief. A lot of paintings are made for reproduction in magazines. It is really important to me to make works that could only be painted and experienced as paintings."

Sklar began building up his surfaces with blobs of oil paint scraped off of his glass palette. He added the latex linings from pots of acrylic paint. Then he discovered that a coating of latex paint on a figurine would yield a flexible mold, which he pressed onto the canvas. Toy dinosaurs, guns, holsters, horses, elephants--even Pinocchio--have their ghostly replicas mashed onto the pictures.

"It's debris, refuse, garbage," insists the artist. "It's all subtext, things you experience rather than intellectually arrive at. You feel the sense of history there."

On top of this motley melange, Sklar paints wave patterns, blood vessels, caricatures, riffs from art history and architecture. "I want a tension between the built-up relief and the final painting so the balance is fairly classical," he says.

"I snicker at the idea of people doing something new--it's such an important thing in the art world. So it's never been an interest of mine, but, through dumb luck, I actually came up with something new," he says.

Sklar moved to L.A. four years ago from the Bay Area, where he had lived since 1981. Why did he leave? "Maturity. Ambition," he jokes. "If you're a painter, it's extremely provincial and conservative. I got to be really lazy."

The relocation forced the artist to reevaluate his entire enterprise. In San Francisco, he had painted many murals under the aegis of the California Arts Council, including one for the civic center. Sklar, who is self-taught, valued the experience. "It provided me with a lot of training in terms of hand-to-eye coordination. It was helpful in terms of learning how to paint." But he came to consider his style of abstraction mixed with tightly rendered realism to be "too serious, too self-conscious."

Sklar, the son of an art-therapist mother and physician father, recalls a youthful bent toward caricatures and, in the fourth grade, taught himself drafting. "Back then, I thought Philip Johnson was really great," he laughs. Sklar went to Wesleyan University in Connecticut to study architecture but switched to Renaissance studies and graduated in 1980 with a bachelor of arts degree in art history.

"I liked academics, but I didn't love it. I was involved in politics, which led me to start the mural painting."

In L.A., Sklar dedicated himself to "dumbing down." "I needed to unlearn my overly historical approach. I needed to learn about things like 'The Wizard of Oz.' L.A. glories in not having any concept of its history. It was the perfect place to experience the necessary friction, alienation, loss of structure. It's crazy, but it offers an artist the ability to work.

"In the art world, there are all these kids who come out of Yale and CalArts who are supposed to have it all figured out. They can be very mindful and intentional; they've read all the criticism that accompanies artwork. I think it's a disaster in terms of being an artist. You get art that is dry, overly serious, self-conscious. I like making serious art, but there are some really good fart jokes in Shakespeare.

"There was too much intention in my painting," he adds. "You get raised in one of these upper-middle-class homes, you go to a good school and you can talk the part, but that is not art. That is not why one does it.

"Painting needs a slower time. Part of that time is memory. That's what the art form is really good at, why painting has vitality still," he says. "Investigating one's place in the universe while bound by one's culture, that is what art is. There is belief, embarrassment and joy in that."

*

KEITH SKLAR'S "VALENCIA," Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica. Dates: Opens Saturday. Regular schedule: Tuesdays to Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Phone: (310) 828-8488.