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ART

Forget Fiberglass--Canvas Means Romance

Tim Ebner didn't take up painting as an art form until six years ago--well after becoming an international star in the go-go '80s.

August 31, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

When Tim Ebner opens the door of his Atwater bungalow, his hands are covered in bright blue paint. Little smudges and stains of color dot every room of his house. In the rearmost bedroom, which he uses as a studio, those smudges and stains have accumulated to nearly cover the walls. With a rather fiendish grin, Ebner says: "The old lady who owned the house before me was so tidy, everything was in perfect condition when I moved in."

Also in the studio are Ebner's paintings of bears, horses and raccoons with human hands and eyes, wearing outfits and hanging around the ocean or fields of flowers. More bizarre than sentimental, they are lovingly indebted to such misfit artists as James Ensor, Philip Guston, even Van Gogh. They will be on view at the Rosamund Felsen Gallery from Sept. 6 to Oct. 4.

Stranger than the subject matter of the paintings is the story of how they came to exist. Ebner, 44, took up such painting only six years ago, turning his back on a decade of success as an abstract artist.

In the 1980s, Ebner went from CalArts graduate to international art star in the course of a few fast-paced years. Using the materials and techniques of light industry, Ebner produced series after series of glossy, gorgeous reflective panels that referenced the '60s Finish Fetish, one of the first Southern California art movements to gain critical acclaim. Collectors and museums eagerly purchased his fiberglass planks and his commercially produced discs of swirling resin. These Postmodern critiques of abstract painting were embraced by critics and Ebner was one of a handful of Southern California artists included in Bruce Kurtz's survey text on contemporary art.

But ultimately Ebner wasn't satisfied. "[Those works] were about a certain attitude--about process, materials and the work of the '60s--you could go on and on. It became really boring to me," he says.

"I could talk about industrial usages transplanted to an art context. But the real aspirations of abstraction, I wasn't comfortable with at all," he adds. "Mondrian had a conviction about abstraction. I wanted to be about the spiritual aspirations of the abstractionists but I don't have the intellect for that. I'm a little quirkier."

One evening in 1991, he was drinking champagne at a party in the downtown loft of Carol Vena Mondt. "She had a wonderful studio. Some beautiful 6-foot canvases were stretched and they looked tantalizing. She asked if I wanted to make a painting. I said, 'Yes.' I was getting tired of my work and going through a kind of crisis. I put the brush in the paint, slopped it on the canvas and the mark just glowed. I worked all night on that painting."

Ebner worked in Vena Mondt's studio, painting, for three months. Rosamund Felsen agreed to show these early efforts, where monsters merged with abstract shapes. One notable aspect of the show was the addition of the artist's four-poster maple bed, in the middle of the gallery. He blushes remembering this gesture. "I felt so anxious [about the new work]. It was like the astronauts bringing their pillows into outer space."

The early '90s downturn in the art market helped him make the move to a new style. Ebner was ready to leave the high-flying '80s behind anyway. "If I had any minutes left in my allotment of the 15 minutes of fame, you can have them," he says.

"It's too much pressure," he adds. "You lose friends and your life becomes really anxious. I spent most of the money I had making art so it was a very productive time. I bought a house. But there is something insatiable about it. It came too quickly, too much and it blew everything out of proportion. When I look back, I have no nostalgia about it at all. Meeting people, traveling, anxiety about shows, the jealousy, good riddance."

As Ebner attempted to weld his earlier abstractions to oil painting, the results were not well received. In a 1993 review in *The Times* David Pagel wrote, "It's clear that Ebner knows how to paint. The problem is that he doesn't seem to know what to paint. Until he finds a subject that matches his skills as a craftsman, his images will be overshadowed by his facility with materials."

Three years later, Ebner had found his subject matter and Pagel revised his opinion. "Tugging at your heartstrings while triggering a touch of trepidation, these loaded works are also metaphors for life," he wrote.

Staring at the menagerie gathered in his living room, Ebner says, "I could almost explain away the earlier work. With these, I can't do that. As soon as I try to intellectualize them, they are gone. It's like they are in contact with a higher source--maybe that's a metaphor for what I hope the experience of painting would be like. That is very romantic but maybe that is all you have in a way."

In one picture, a bear wears a top hat, carries an umbrella and strolls through a field of chrysanthemums. Ebner fetches his childhood Disney nature book to show the model for the bear. The hat is drawn from John Singer Sargeant, the flowers from a gardening book and the bear's hand is copied from Jesus' pose in El Greco's "El Espolio." Somehow, these disparate choices come together as original Ebner.

In another picture, a wolf in military uniform tenderly holds a large green fish while an alligator in a monk's robe smells an orchid. Ebner explains that many of these seemingly surreal compositions are the result of his own limitations as a painter: "You kind of work with your inadequacies and you invent from that. You are always fighting and making compromises and in that repetition, you invent."

Squinting behind his tortoise-shell glasses, he adds, "It's not just that it's the wild and crazy world of painting because that is not the way it is at all. You are always analyzing and scrutinizing every square inch. It's a combination of logic and perverseness, the tension between what are formal elements in a painting and the strange possibilities. An alligator in a monk's outfit makes sense because it fits well in that place. The colors and the painting work well together within the logistics of pictorialism."

Ebner discovered art relatively late in life. After graduating from high school in San Diego, Ebner worked on fishing boats and dairy farms and traveled. He was in his mid-20s when he was accepted at CalArts. "School was great because it was the first time anyone dealt with me as though I was serious or intelligent," he says. Although painting was not encouraged at CalArts, Ebner had an affinity for it. "I would sneak out and go to LACMA to look at Matisse," he says. But he took just one painting class in five years so he is largely self-taught. "Trial and error," he says. "You adapt to your inadequacies. Embrace your

insecurities and make them work for you. You negotiate through your ineptness."

Ebner now spends his weekends fishing with artist friends on a boat off the coast of San Diego. His freezer is full of bluefin tuna and dorado and he's started smoking fish on his back patio. From the boat, Ebner can see the neighborhood where he spent his adolescence. His father, William Ebner, an Air Force colonel, and his mother, Rose, a poet and short-story writer, are retired there. Given the many connections to his past, you wonder if the paintings, with their military uniforms, religious gestures and piscine associations, are symbolic portraits. "That parallel would not be that interesting to me," says Ebner. "What is great is that painting has a life independent of you."

"There is a romance with painting and if you don't have that, you wouldn't be doing it. Even though it sounds romantic, if you want to connect to something larger than yourself, painting is a vehicle for doing it," he says. "There is a humbleness to the activity that puts you in your place; you are always confronted with your limitations. I must be some kind of masochist."

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TIM EBNER, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Bergamot Station B-4, 2525 Michigan Ave., B-4, Santa Monica. Dates: Opens Saturday. Gallery hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Ends Oct. 4. Phone: (310) 828-8488.