

CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY

Kara Maria



Kara Maria @ Catharine Clark

By David M. Roth
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African Elephant, 2015 Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12"

The artist doesn't use these bits of appropriation as signifiers. Instead, she employs them as formal compositional elements, stripped of associations and carefully apportioned to serve as props for whatever her subject may be. The artist calls her approach "cheerfully apocalyptic," a designation that dovetails nicely with the rekindled interest in Edmund Burke's (1729-97) ideas about the sublime, which many artists over the past few years have employed as conceptual framework for dealing with ecocide and the replacement of actual experience with simulated or virtual experience.

That would certainly be the case with *Haywire*, Maria's her fourth show with the gallery. It features 15 works small-to-medium size works targeting environmental destruction, the weight of which is borne by lone animals (primates, rhinos, rodents, skunks, bats, leopards) dropped into artificial environments. Repeated motifs in these paintings include: starburst explosions

seen from an aerial perspective; spiraling vapor trails; a quasi-cubist sense of space defined by hard-edge geometric forms; swatches of scraped paint executed in the manner of Gerhard Richter; and dots and stripes of the sort Roy Lichtenstein once used.



Head Over Heels, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60"

Peer through all this activity and you'll see many things: a skunk perched on a bulbous shape that could have been cut out and colored by Matisse; a raccoon situated similarly on a patch of squeegee-pulled paint; a hippo strolling into a pinkish fireworks display; a bat winging across a toxic swamp; and a leopard lost in a downpour of molecular diagrams. Ask yourself what these creatures are doing in these settings and the answer is obvious: they're trying to survive. Problem is: there's not much urgency conveyed. What we see in *Haywire* feels more like a pop surrealist vision of dystopian resignation than anything truly apocalyptic (i.e. Bosch, Brueghel, John Martin, Max Ernst.)

It's a shift from the gut punches Maria's delivered in the past. Chief among them was a 2009 series in which she linked military violence to sexual exploitation and abuse, a harbinger of headlines coming out of Afghanistan just this past week. In saying this I realize I may be advocating for the kind of stridency that typically gets politically engaged artists in trouble. However, given the stakes involved and Maria's ability to call out execrable human behavior, it seems only right to want a stronger critique than the one she's given us with *Haywire*.

That said, it's impossible not to admire the artist's compositional acuity. Her unmooring of well-worn visual tropes, and her integration of them into cohesive paintings that bear her unmistakable imprint still carry a strong charge, irrespective of whether or not they're expressing an overt political viewpoint.