

PRESS

Bailey Winters

*Ambush: The Story of the TDA*

4 - 27 June 2010

***“Bailey Winters at New American Art Union.”***

**by Richard Speer**

**The Wilamette Week**

**June 9, 2010**

More than ever, we live in two or more worlds at once. We're on the beach but on the cellphone. We're at a show blogging our impressions of the show. It's no longer acceptable to just be here now; we must be here and meta-here. This month at New American Art Union, painter Bailey Winters captures our endless oscillations with incisiveness and style. In *Ambush: The Story of the TDA*, he mashes up an uncanny photorealistic technique with cartoonishly lowbrow tableaux that jar our perceptions and mirror our fractured attention spans.

In the painting *As a Result of His Relationship With the Press...*, two figures with finely brushed faces bookend an amateurish depiction of a hairy-chested man/tiger hybrid. In *This is the Most Famous and Recognizable Image...*, five exquisitely rendered guerrilla operatives brandish assault guns crudely outlined in pink, fuchsia and green. Looking at the paintings from afar, you could swear they incorporate photo collage, but up close, you see that, no, this is old-fashioned oil paint on linen—no tricks, just exquisite facility with the human form. Winters knows better than to use his talent to paint floral still lifes and cheesy female nudes the way baby boomer photorealists do. At 29, he belongs to a post-postmodern generation (he's lead singer of the hilarious post-ironic disco/pop band Strength) and has fun playing it both winky-winky and straight. To frame his narratives he created a back story concerning a shadowy revolutionary group known as TDA, whose members' exploits he details on his website, [baileywinters.com](http://baileywinters.com). This back story is yawningly tedious, but hey, narrative painters need narratives to drive their work. Henry Darger had his 15,000-page manuscript about children with ambiguous genitalia, and religious painters from Byzantium through the Renaissance recycled Christianity's cornerstone tropes ad infinitum. But make no mistake: Winters' central conceit is not his third-rate story line; it's his audacious formal melange of lowbrow and high concept. While his compositions aren't as imaginatively realized as they could be, his style has legs. With guidance and time, this painter could evolve into something spectacular.

***“When is a Raven Like a Writing Desk? Bailey Winters tackles narrative head-on.”***

**by Megan Driscoll**

**PORT - [www.portlandart.net](http://www.portlandart.net)**

**June 18, 2010**

Let me tell you a story: A human hand picked up a tool, dipped it in pigment, and made an image. Over time, the hand learned to perfectly replicate the world with its brush. But it soon grew tired of imitation, breaking down the image further and further until it dissolved into impenetrable shapes and colors. And then it was declared dead, over, done, deceased, obsolete. But the human spirit persists, and with it the urge to layer pigment into image. So the hand soldiered on, ignoring accusations of theatricality, embracing somber color fields alongside seductive figures, creating and recreating, and always, forever, painting.

Painting in this century is inevitably laden with generations of artistic and theoretical baggage. To apply paint to canvas is to recall the entire canon of Western art history, with all its conflicts, anxieties, and overwrought arguments. Yet, in his current show at the New American Art Union, Bailey Winters manages to inject new life into the tired history of painting. He brings near-perfect technique to a balls-out embrace of narrative (and narrative art forms) in a series that manages to enchant, entertain, and engage. In other words, these are paintings that you can really sink your teeth into - and enjoy chewing.

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For *Ambush: The Story of the TDA*, Winters invented a 21st century revolutionary group, "The Tiger Den Association." The TDA started as a peaceful political organization, but soon suffered an internal rift between one leader promoting non-violent activism and another who believed that they should be "a militant group who demanded equality and basic rights for all people." When militant Melissa won over peaceful Matias, the group became "The Tiger Den Army," engaging in violent acts of protest until (spoiler alert!) they met their inevitable demise and/or arrest in a shootout with the police.

There is an immense amount of material to be unpacked in the story alone. Melissa, the violent female leader. The Marjorie Iglesias and Bailey "Shadow" affair. Dr. "Zhivago," who declines to press charges after being kidnapped by the group. The story, told through captions associated with each painting and a short intro and outro, embraces gender politics, back stage dealing, sexual scandal, Stockholm Syndrome, and an underlying faith in the righteousness of the radical left-wing cause. Winters cites real-life revolutionary groups as source material, including The Symbionese Liberation Army, The Black Panther Party, The White Panther Party, and The Weather Underground Organization, and a general fascination with organizations that "rise up violently in the hopes of establishing a peace of some kind."

But while he's crafted a fabulously entertaining tale (read it all here), what's truly fascinating about the project isn't the story itself. It's the way that Winters chose to fully incorporate narrative into his work, creating a series of canvasses that owe as much to graphic novels as they do to traditional painting.

Of course, the project has its antecedents in painting, including Gerhard Richter's series October 18, 1977. Inspired by the real-life horror story of the demise of the violent activist Baader-Meinhof Gang while in German police custody, Richter created a chilling series of black and white photorealistic paintings made that much creepier by the classic "Richter blur." Named for the day that three of the activists-cum-terrorists were discovered dead in their prison cells (their deaths were officially declared suicides, but suspicions of government-sanctioned homicide remain), the paintings depict scenes from the lives and deaths of the controversial gang.

Although Richter chose to let history tell the story underlying his paintings, both artists draw on the rich narrative potential of activist/terrorist groups. Violence, politics, and a dubiously moral underdog make for a great story that begs to be mined for visual material. And both artists felt that a single painting would fail to capture the depth of the material at hand.

But that's where the similarities end. Richter's series reads like a set of disturbing news photographs - grim black and white paintings portraying flashbulb moments in faithful, albeit blurry, photorealism. Each of Winters's images reads like a story unto itself, blending an impressive (un-blurred) photorealism directly into a highly painterly, at times graphic, style that is dense with symbolism: A heart-shaped peace sign contrasted with a phallic machine gun, halos and dripping martyred wings, growling tigers and seemingly abstract stripes driving the "Tiger Den" theme home.

It's from these distinctive features - the transition between styles and the incredible narrative density of each painting - that Winters really owes his debt to comics and graphic novels. Creating a set of archetypal characters, placing them in a "pop-art world," and telling their stories in a series of image panels accompanied by text draws heavily on the tropes of the illustrated narrative genre. However, Winters does manage to keep the images firmly in the realm of painting by relying more on loose, painterly strokes than finely drawn outlines for the contextual elements.

The artist himself attributes the show's "narrative quality" (perhaps a deliberately dramatic understatement) to his interest in film. But that relationship breaks down for this viewer in the use of dense text captions to carry the story along - even silent films couldn't get away with this much reading. Still, the captions feel like a crucial element of the project, since narrative is what takes these paintings from merely interesting to truly successful. While each painting is remarkably successful in visually conveying its own snippet of the story, the paragraphs offer the reader/viewer tantalizing bits of information that turn a set of paintings into a solid series of work. (It's worth noting that Winters uses the captions in place of titles for each work.)

In fact, my one complaint with the show is that the paintings were hung on the wall without the text. Each was numbered, and a mapped hand-out was offered so that visitors could read along as they walked through the gallery. But for once this is a show that is enhanced by dense wall text and hindered by the notion that the images should stand alone. Each painting holds up to solo visual scrutiny, but as a body of work they feel naked without their captions, like a poem without its title.

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Of course, these paintings are not poems, or graphic novels, or films. They're gorgeously, emphatically paintings. Although the mix of styles is suggestive of collage, the artist assures me that the only thing he applied to the linen is paint. Winters demonstrates technical virtuosity by moving elegantly from carefully rendered, photorealistic faces and (some) body parts to brightly colored, painterly backgrounds and objects. The technique consciously directs the viewer's eye and announces the fact that the artist is playing games with fantasy and reality. In some places Winters flirts with being a little heavy handed in telling us what to think - bit character Eileen Feinstein painted in pensive black and white outlines, the most minimalist element of the series - but that can be forgiven in a body of work that overtly asserts its right to tell us a story.

Ultimately, *Ambush: The Story of the TDA* represents a remarkable attempt from a young artist to assert his position as one of Portland's most interesting painters. And while it's Winters's successful rejection of the painting as a stand-alone object that takes its place in the po-pomo revision of art history, it's the visually seductive evidence of the artist's hand that keeps the series firmly rooted in the tradition of painting.

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