

A Future Present
by Ben Davis

"The Post Apocalyptic Tattoo," May 13-June 13, 2005, at
Lunabase Inc., Gallery I, 197 Grand Street, Brooklyn, N.Y.
11211

D. Dominick Lombardi's art is about the effects of a globe-shaking environmental catastrophe, picturing a universe where humankind has been forced to evolve in reaction to an increasingly poisonous world. "The Post Apocalyptic Tattoo," a densely packed show of work by the 50-year-old, Valhalla, N.Y.-based artist at Brooklyn's Lunabase gallery, brings together painting, drawing and sculpture made over the last six years, showing the increasing maturity that this narrative has developed in his work.

What's curious is how sunny the apocalypse seems here. Lombardi's end of the world is staged with a kind of sitcom cheerfulness, a feeling that is furthered by the styles he chooses to employ. His paintings -- usually executed by applying paint to the back of Plexiglas -- resemble animation cells, with large, flat patches of color standing as backgrounds for his awkward, twisted creatures. His sketches and ink drawings illustrate misshapen faces in the stripped-down, linear style of tattoo art. And his sculptures made by a process in which the artist builds up layers of acrylic paint that he then sculpts blow up the physiognomy of these faces in a style and scale that makes them resemble models for attractions at a dystopian Disneyland.



D. Dominick Lombardi
Spirit (George)
2002



Brain Styling (Romeo and Juliet)

The tension between dire imaginings of end times, on the one hand, and a benign goofiness, on the other, is condensed in the bodies of the ragtag cast of mutants Lombardi paints. The paintings that comprise the earliest work on display at Lunabase depict characters that shamle deliberately along the line between repulsive and lovable. In *Brain Styling (Romeo and Juliet)* (1999), a scrawny, big-eyed Romeo-thing gazes adoringly upon a limbless beige Juliet-blob. Rather than sit on the typical balcony, Juliet gazes at her paramour from atop what appears to be a helpful jet of steam. Meanwhile, both of the lovers have decked themselves with streamers made out of their extruded, multicolored brains, which in this future are used to individualize oneself in the same way that people today style their hair or put on jewelry.

These paintings have nice splashes of wit in them. However, the more recent series of tattoo-like drawings show Lombardi finding ways to add necessary gravity to his cosmology in a way that seems to evolve naturally from its internal logic. The india ink drawings of faces that occupy several walls of Lunabase are devoted to cataloguing "the common, everyday person of this post apocalyptic world," as the artist writes in his description. The images are conceived using automatic drawing, letting the personalities of the future emerge from the random adventures of the

1999
Lunabase



Left to Right: *Queen at First Light* and *King*
Both 1999
Lunabase



nk drawings from D. Dominick Lombardi's *Head* series
at Lunabase gallery, Brooklyn

artist's line, each of the faces built from a few decisive lines intertwined, their hair or eyes indicated by filled-in patches of black. The increased anonymity of the resulting images -- each bears the word *Head* and a number for a name makes them less personable and more ambiguous. If the cartoon characters of the paintings are like the bubbly cast of some future TV variety show, the walls of anonymous faces are like the blank crowd of audience members watching.

As the gallery's director, Yuko Kawase Wylie, explains, in Lombardi's future the average life expectancy is around 25 -- so youth culture is the only culture. This is the tentative justification for the reference to tattoo art. But the pared-down style also works because it flatters Lombardi's vision of a future that has reduced its denizens to melted, rubbery forms. Lombardi's sculptures take this increased abstraction a further step. They blow up and monumentalize faces that have particularly captured their creator's imagination from the collection of drawings. Hung on the wall, the bulbous contours of the acrylic sculptures render the freakish eye-lumps and bizarrely placed mouth-ruffles of these creatures at what one imagines would be life size. But at the same time, since the alien contours of the heads are left an undifferentiated, ghostly white, they become insubstantial, edging closer to some interesting frontier between a representation of a face and some type of abstract, biomorphic shape.

Now, the end of the world is a serious thing. The visceral "black paintings" of Goya and the mesmerizing nightmare visions of Ernst are powerful in part because they breathe all the tragedy of real brutality. A more contemporary artist like Takashi Murakami manages to invest his images of cartoonish living vegetation with uneasiness about an increasingly dehumanizing world. The particular disasters that Lombardi's art references -- questions about the effects of unleashed genetic engineering, fears about corporations contaminating the water supply -- are real sources of contemporary anxiety. I'm not sure that his work wouldn't be still more vital if it let in more of this seriousness.

But maybe this isn't Lombardi's style. For now, the disastrous future serves as an excuse for some charming paintings, and an increasingly interesting series of drawings and sculptures. If the work doesn't rise to the challenge of truly facing the crisis it sees in the future, it does have enough verve to make things a little less grim in the here and now.

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



Head #485
2003
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