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On the Value of Molly Crabapple's Curious, Critter-Filled Political Painting

:
by Ben Davis
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 "Great American Bubble Machine" / Courtesy the Artist

Molly Crabapple is a star, though not an art star in the conventional sense — and I mean that as a compliment. “Shell Game,” her recent show featuring nine large, fanciful paintings, closed last week at the LES’s small Smart Clothes gallery, attracting outsized street-level buzz during its brief run. Her style is wiry, vibrant, and representational. The scenes deliberately evoke children’s books that some devilish hacker has gotten into, with a bit of Frida and Diego thrown in there, each staging a scene from the political turbulence of the last years — Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, New York — populated by a swarming bestiary of little allegorical animals, cast in the roles of protesters, policemen, and the like.

Part of the energy Crabapple has generated comes from the way that she has industriously created an audience for herself, tapping into a public hungry for art that is accessible, smart, and a few steps to the left of traditional Chelsea fare (just today, she's made high-res versions of the Smart Clothes images available for free through Creative Commons). She’s collaborated with radical burlesque dancers and lefty journalists (Matt Taibbi calls her “Occupy’s greatest artist”); she has a freewheeling column in *Vice*. Her story is fascinating: In bubble-era New York, she became the in-house artist for the famously extravagant nightclub The Box. Inspired by Toulouse-Lautrec and his absinthe-injected sceneogaphy, she got to chronicle I-banker decadence at its most extreme, and at close range. “I drew my beloved performers as gods,” she explained recently. “Customers were coke snorting pigs.”

Then, when Occupy Wall Street broke out in 2011, she found herself sucked in — almost literally since her apartment was nearby. Her skills chronicling live-wire performers now went to work depicting the protestors in Zuccotti Park, an act she considered a kind of guerrilla independent journalism, showing a crowd more multilayered than that depicted by the media. She lent her hand to, among other things, an image that was widely circulated after the police raid on Occupy Oakland that wounded a U.S. vet, an arresting graphic of a woman in profile, brandishing an American flag — a

literally oblique reference to Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People." A swirling cloud of text surrounds her: "Can You See the New World Through the Tear Gas?"

Since the Occupy movement cooled, Crabapple has traveled with UK journalist Laurie Penny to various political crisis zones, illustrating the book "Discordia." This experience is what was most directly being limned in "Shell Game." The painting "Syntagma Athena," for instance, is her take on her sojourn in crisis-wracked Greece, filled with political references and in-jokes. A marble bust of a woman at its center is defaced with graffiti slogans torn from the anarchist campouts of Athens. Literal fat cats, representing eurocrat officialdom, syphon coins from the people. The feisty little yellow pooches who represent the Greek protesters are a reference to "Loukanikos," a street dog who became a popular symbol for its willingness to stand at the front line at marches, defending activists from the cops.

But the canvases are not a groovy form of political reportage. Most of the coverage of "Shell Game" focused on Crabapple's story itself, and not the paintings, which is a shame — but knowing her story does help give a sense of the vectors the recent work is triangulating. The composition of each canvas — tiny figures swarming over a stage-like space, rotating around a central symbolic female figure — is a conscious callback to Crabapple's images of burlesque dancers. She's drawing on and bringing that sense of masquerade and pageantry to her rendering of protest. The orienting female figures always represent some symbol, but they are not necessarily symbols with the same status or moral polarity — in one (the best work at Smart Clothes, in my opinion, dedicated to Occupy London), it is a portrait of her colleague Laurie Penny; in another, the central figure is a ghostly spirit made of floating balloons, representing the evanescent allure of debt.

The point is that these paintings include a personal iconography as well as a topical one, threading together different strands of Crabapple's experience. Her work, it's worth saying, is also just fun: It's almost a toss off, but I've carefully preserved a little Crabapple-designed $1,000,000 dollar bill from the opening, which features a leering aristocratic cat at the center surrounded by wreathes of "vampire squid" tendrils. I have a good idea what the criticisms of her paintings might be: to a certain conservative gaze, they will be too simplistic and political; to a certain lefty eye, they will be not be sharp enough, too cutesy and thereby implicitly insincere. But their virtues, in my mind, reside in how they both consciously riff on and scramble what you expect about political art: "the best political art," she wrote recently in the Jacobin, "is the product not of movements but of the flawed, searching individual mind."

Crabapple has worked as an illustrator, a field where topical commentary has had such a lively place, and she is inspired by figures from this tradition, from Hogarth and Thomas Nast through to Art Spiegelman. Her best works — and I think "Can You See the Future Through the Tear Gas" is a really cool work — have often been a kind of visual caption to urgent words, arresting actions. There is a specific type of talent in that. But the pieces in "Shell Game," while drawing on that talent, were something else again. They were specifically retrospective in character, about summing up a period of turmoil ("The ecstatic rebellions have faded away under police batons and their own mismanagement," she wrote.) That, I think, is why their emotional tone is so even-tempered, why the gazes of the figures at their centers are so cool.

The works depict not the moment of battle, but the moment after the battle, when impellent communication is cooling into pictures and memories, and one is sorting out a personal take on it. The bluntness of their allegories feels like the still-urgent presence of the political moment pressing through the canvas; the whimsy and stylization is this urgency being translated into a form where you can reflect on it, even joke about it, and so live with it and face the present — which is a valuable survival skill, for artists and for movements alike.

Reviews, Molly Crabapple, Ben Davis

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