

DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

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ARTFORUM

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JIM NUTT, *Untitled*, 2008, graphite on paper, 13 x 13

Jim Nutt

David Nolan Gallery

What struck me about this exhibition of Jim Nutt's works (perhaps it had something to do with the tidy elegance of the installation) was not the monstrousness of his figures, to refer to their place in the so-called Chicago monster roster, or to their supposedly "hairy" (who) character, in the slang sense of that word—difficult, frightening, or risky—but rather the immaculateness of their execution. His figures may be monstrous and hairy, but Nutt is a perfectionist—a master draftsman.

Almost half the show, which included works made from 1967 to this year, were drawings, seven of them of female heads completed since 2008. (The show also featured three paintings of female heads made over the past six years.) However bizarrely distorted, usually by outlandish hairdos and enlarged noses—sometimes grotesquely beaklike (conveying the generally predatory character of Nutt's women), and often with flaring nostrils—the heads are exquisitely rendered, the "soft touch" of the refined lines even suggesting that the artist has a certain affection for his female subjects. Nutt has been linked to Expressionism and Surrealism, but I think a better link is to Paul Klee: There is the same whimsical fantasy, the same precisely focused singular image; perhaps most tellingly, there is a tendency toward decorative patterning, evident in the neat, repetitive lines of the hair, and also in the designs on some of the blouses of the bust-length figures.

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Also present are the same all-over flatness and precarious compromise between the abstract and the naturalistic, making the figure more uncanny and haunting than monstrous and intimidating. Nutt's female busts are divided against themselves—the difference between their ugly “plane-faced” heads and full, rounded breasts conveys his conflicted attitude toward them. It is the male artist's familiar emotional problem with his female subject, and suggestive of the technical problem of rendering the difference between the character-filled face and the anonymous natural body while showing that they belong to the same person.

The surfaces of Nutt's paintings are invariably smooth, lending the works a certain precious quality and neutralizing their blatantly sensationalist subject matter, similar in effect to that of the drawings' delicate handling. Indeed, without its meticulously constructed surface—down to the patch of leather neatly screwed into the Plexiglas picture plane—Nutt's notorious scatological *Miss Sue Port*, 1967, would be just another extravagant *Mad* magazine heroine, a compound of the organic and mechanical with exaggerated erogenous zones, made more “mystifying” by quasi-Duchampian puns. Similarly, *Broad Jumper*, 1967, makes artistic—dare one say aesthetic?—sense because of its shaped Plexiglas “canvas,” not because of the expressive-surreal character of the muscle-bound “broad,” or because she's provocatively sucking a penis, probably more imagine than real. The perverse, in-your-face “low” content is attention-grabbing, but without the formalist devices that Nutt uses to turn it into “high” art, his freaks would read principally as emotionally disturbed—and disturbing—adolescent projections.

—Donald Kuspit