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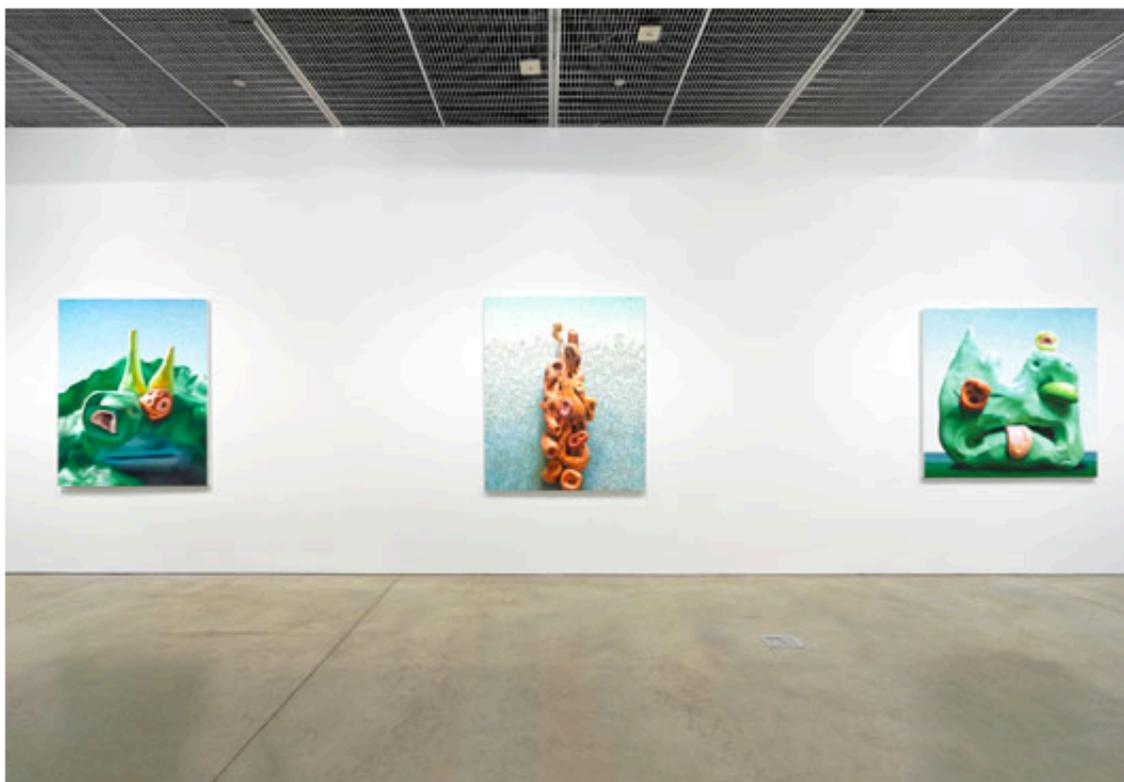
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Hybrids, Mutants: Alexander Ross at David Nolan
by David Brody



Alexander Ross, installation view of "Recent Terrestrials," 2014, at David Nolan Gallery. Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery.

The painting and drawing practices of Alexander Ross, always in fundamental opposition, have increasingly been cross-pollinating. The paintings create photorealist illusions, and are thus, to a high degree, preordained. They are mappings of a kind, in which, in Carroll Dunham's appreciative phrase, Ross "systematizes rendering as a conflation of sonar and paint-by-numbers." The images they map are purpose-made glossy digital photo-collages of Plasticine sculptures, built in turn upon ideas in the drawings. As for the drawings themselves, they are pure inventions. They grow before our eyes. And if the synthetic atmosphere of the paintings can seem anaerobic (yet so viscously seductive that one willingly forswears oxygen), the drawings are earthy and florid, drawn as if by an ecstatic 19th-century Dr. Seuss looking through a microscope and reporting

back from the microbial frontier. Simultaneous gallery shows in 2008 at David Nolan and Marianne Boesky showcased Ross's drawings in relation to his then better-known paintings, emphatically revealing their opposition, but also their mediated interdependence as stages along a continuum. Think of Ross's linkage of methods — drawing, painting, photography, digital manipulation, sculpture, and collage — as a fan belt designed to keep his mad-scientist ideas from overheating, to the point, as has often been noted, of post-human chilliness. But a thaw was evident as far back as those twin exhibitions of 2008. Hybrid drawing-photo works, graphically outlined paintings, and color-banded pencil illusions showed that Ross was in fact beginning to put drawing and painting procedures into direct contact, step by Gregor Mendel-like step.

The new work on view at David Nolan, a decade into these controlled experiments, exhibits full chromosomal exchange: the drawings are now essentially photorealistic, while the paintings invite graphic ideas into isolated Plasticene nodules and their increasingly open-ended backgrounds. Even more, the untitled paintings denoted (AR5072), (AR5073) and (AR5075) let drawing in from the beginning, where it lays down the law. Opting out of Ross's previously inviolable figure/ground, sky/horizon convention, these unprecedented canvases offer soft frontal grids that can be carved into. This relief space is a revival of an established drawing motif, a vertical slice through cellular gray matter that exposes visceral pockets and interrupted ducts — rendered with Ross's familiar low-bandwidth slime-o-realism. Yet, despite the sense of hidden rot or infestation thereby exposed, the tissue wall is soft and rounded, not a wound but a specimen cultured against laboratory glass, its graphic undulations blending smoothly, almost spongily, into photorealist punctures and cavities.

Normally at such border zones Ross lays it on thick, as in another hybrid canvas, (AR5232), which places a red trompe l'oeil fungal stalk abruptly against a backdrop version of the cell-wall motif, this one scrawled by oil stick into wet ground. In the context of Ross's slow-boat methodology this loose sgraffito is wildly Matissean. But even so, it's just another map-able asset, like the piled-up ridges of his fully photoreal passages. There, his meticulous sculpting of illusion owes equal amounts to the shifty self-consciousness of Gerhard Richter and the atelier positivism of Chuck Close. Or, going wide angle, we might take bearings on the viscid leafage of Thomas Cole and the encaustic hatchings on the maps and flags of Jasper Johns — the granddaddy and the grand Dada of American landscape. In that suspiciously empty wilderness, Ross may be our best contemporary guide.

The untitled paintings denoted (AR5233), (AR5234), and (AR5235) are far more typical of Ross's exhaustive survey of a brave new world. They adhere to his longstanding if ceaselessly tweaked convention, mentioned above, of placing foreground figures against distant looming skies. Within this controlled environment he has been cataloguing "plastic life forms," as he calls them, for some 20 years, as well as their degree of digital chunkiness, edge conditions, focal quality, and color spread. The startling twist in these new landscapes is that... well, actually, they aren't landscapes at all, but faces. Or at any rate, Archimboldo-esque coagulations that insist on being *read* as faces. A couple of them sport genuinely fleshy tongues, though whether the tongues are human or amphibian or functionally attached is up for grabs. A half-dozen drawings on view also look back at the viewer, either as masks or dimly sentient beings, or maybe phantasms of a troubled mind. Some sport tongues that, as with those in the paintings, seem to have been ripped wriggling and wet from a higher life form. These new drawings closely follow Ross's photorealistic painting procedures, though more atmospherically, by means of delicate, interfering layers of crayon color. At this moment the fan belt seems to be turning in reverse, as the paintings are driving the drawings.

As for the in-your-face faces: pareidolic forms have always hovered a small step from cognition in the work, but here Ross takes a giant leap into the grotesque. No longer the objective bio-lab technician, the artist stands revealed as Victor Frankenstein. But will the stitched-together features in the new work come to life? Do they imply an embryonic — maybe even hostile — intelligence?

From the evidence of the strangely goofy visages, there is little to worry about thus far. The Pugsley-and-Wednesday tongues notwithstanding, a preschool Jeff Koons might have Play-Dohed the blobbier ones among them. On the other hand, the most refined of the drawings, (AR5238), is creepily humanoid, its Plasticine skull sharpened to a Neolithic spear point. Protuberant horns and blades can be found in the face-conjuring paintings too, but here the heroic landscape scale evokes distant mountaintops as much as lethal body armor. (At 90 inches tall, one canvas is, I believe, Ross's largest ever.) Still, the sense of scale is unsettled, and unsettling: the sharp peaks are preternaturally clear, and the over-exposed highlights glare forensically.

The more you look, the more pathogenic the paintings begin to feel, as if they might be dumb, deadly parasites whose incipient facial mimicry is evolving to penetrate the defenses of host organisms. If these repulsively seductive paintings feel unhealthy to view, that is no small accomplishment, and lesser artists would stop there. Ross, on the other hand, has just opened a Pandora's Box of drawing ideas — new spaces, new structures — that the paintings now must pay attention to. Expect further mutations.