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Alexander Ross: 'Recent Terrestrials'

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An Alexander Ross head (untitled oil), that plays with dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery, New York

Art in Review

By KEN JOHNSON

Why do painters still paint? One reason is that it's an efficient way to obsess over the insoluble [mind-body problem](#). People have physical bodies and nonphysical consciousness, but no one knows exactly how they connect. Similarly, paintings are material objects and vehicles of immaterial imagination, and the relationship between those two aspects remains magnetically mysterious.

Consider Alexander Ross's comically gross, Pop-surrealist paintings. [The exhibition](#)'s most engaging works are pictures of monstrous, misshapen heads that look as if made from lumps of greasy, mostly green clay by an imaginative child. One that's depicted on a canvas nearly five feet square has its cranium peaked on one side and bulging on the other. Resting on a flat surface against a luminous pale-blue

background, it has an eye like a deformed red pepper and another like a smooth cucumber jutting from its socket. With a pink tongue protruding from its wide, fiercely frowning mouth, it looks as if it wants to scare the viewer away. It's uncannily alive, but no, it's just paint. In several pictures, all-over patterns of cellular shapes are interrupted by illusory gashes and punctures exposing what resembles subcutaneous pink flesh. Those paintings are like wounded animals.

Examining any of these works up close you see that Mr. Ross simultaneously produces and subverts illusions of three-dimensionality. He renders volumes by means of narrow bands of color in gradated shades the way topographers do. He's like a magician revealing the secrets of his tricks even as he performs them, but without ruining the magic.