

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com



art ●●●

Taking another, more favorable look at a key member of Chicago's 'Hairy Who' posse

Head Case

by **Jerry Saltz**

November 7th, 2003 6:00 PM



Headstrong meticulousness: a detail of Nutt's *Untitled* (2002-2003)
(photo: Robin Holland)

Jim Nutt

Nolan/Eckman Gallery
560 Broadway
Through November 26

Back in the late 1970s, when I was a young artist (yes, I was once one, too) and still living in Chicago, Jim Nutt was the enemy. I hated his work. It stood for everything I—then an *Artforum*-obsessed, insecure Midwesterner—was against: It wasn't about materials, process, or abstraction. It wasn't post-minimal, rigorous, or Bruce Nauman enough. Instead, it was surreal, funky, and festively colored. Bizarre characters did batty things in shallow space. Women with teeny, atavistic arms gaped at men with squished penises as pint-size figures darted about like crazy wraiths. Everything

seemed caught in some demonic cartoon kaleidoscope. It's hard to admit now, but back then I was embarrassed by what seemed to be Nutt's runaway regionalism. When visiting New Yorkers asked to see the work of Nutt or his fellow "Hairy Who" artists (even their appellation rubbed me the wrong way), I'd wince and say, "Don't look at that stuff; it's not abstract." Plus he had that insane name.

It may be one of the inevitabilities of getting older, but now I love Nutt's art for many of the reasons I once hated it. Nutt, 65, has matured too; his work is plugged into more traditions and has ripened. His surrealism isn't as full-throttled honky-tonk, and his figures, while just as out there, are more intensely realized. He's never lived in New York, but after decades of exhibiting with Chicago doyenne Phyllis Kind, Nutt now shows at Nolan/Eckman, a gallery known for its Germanic bent and its penchant for resurrecting renegades like Peter Saul and Barry Le Va. Whether Nutt has become more mainstream or the mainstream has become more like him, his current show of 12 drawings and three paintings of women is intoxicating.

When looking at Nutt's small-scale, wispy drawings and opalescent paintings, imagine Ingres and Mirò getting together with Arshile Gorky and Saul Steinberg to render a race of extraterrestrial Kabuki actors or intergalactic film noir actresses; or Cranach, Klee, H.C. Westermann, and R. Crumb drawing the refined gentlewomen of Flatland. There are echoes of neoclassicism, Northern Renaissance, outsider art, some weird Egyptian or Mesopotamian bas-relief space, and African haircut advertisements.

While this show of only portraits can be repetitious (women are all Nutt has painted for the past 13 years), it provides an opportunity to revel in his headstrong meticulousness. When pressed about who these women are by painter Carroll Dunham in the catalog's marvelous cat-and-mouse interview, Nutt ducks, saying, "They just evolve out of the process." Since most resemble '40s housewives or unassuming caretakers, I'd guess they're stand-ins for Nutt's mother, who was always sickly and who died when he was 28. Nevertheless, Nutt is not an artist to look to for emotion. It's almost as if he's taken his work to this absurdly stylized place to avoid it. Still, the paintings, which often take as long as a year to complete and are done in a laboriously anal-retentive hand, have unreal levels of visual lucidity. Surfaces are daintily gone over numberless times; transparencies build up and diffuse; areas of ultra-fine crosshatched brushwork become minuscule veins in beak-like noses. As unspontaneous as these obdurate objects are, they give off an alluring acrylic glow.

Because Nutt is a wizard of facial detail, there are various tours one can take through the exhibition. On the nose tour, keep in mind poet Geoffrey Young's observation, "Nutt has never seen a nostril he couldn't invaginate," which I think means turn into a vagina. Indeed, a lot of these noses, which are worlds unto themselves and go from snout to schnozzola, are pretty sexy. Several have what I think are a woman's buttocks on them. Many look like interuterine structures. Most are cauliflower-, uvula-, or Klingon-like and have pinched fissures that dip into cupid-bow lips.

The hair is so ingenious you can suppose he missed his calling as a hairdresser. Nutt's manes, which are worn in oddly antiquated George Washington cuts and Picasso-esque bobs, are obsessive and outrageously abstract. I thought I saw Brancusi sculptures, birds' wings, boomerangs, and breaking waves on these women's heads. The detailing of the hair includes herringbone patterns, dashes, and dots. This linear glossary is even more refined on the eyebrows, where you will see Mirò-like comb shapes and what appear to be wavy fields of grass. The mouths are plain, while the eyes are mines of wily asymmetry.

As an artist, Nutt is often aptly described as an "oddball." He is that, but he's also part of a tradition: He's a nonmodern modern artist. Like Balthus, Dalí, Magritte, and Christian Schad, or more recently John Currin, Nutt thinks radically but paints conservatively. He has said, "I like the idea of being modern, but when I try to do something modern . . . it just feels terrible." Although his range is limited and his touch fussy, and it's not clear where he'll go from faces, it's obvious that Nutt's art, while maniacal, has always been about materials, process, and form, and that I was just too green to see it all those years ago