



MIKEL GLASS:

Fearless Painter

This New York artist conjures disquieting images from common objects to invite consideration of some very large topics.

by John A. Parks

Mikel Glass approaches his work with a fearless passion. Unafraid of varying his subject matter, he blithely changes media from painting to sculpture and back again. Moreover, he is consistently courageous in taking on difficult and challenging subjects in his work. While most artists construct exhibitions around single themes, mindful of maintaining a cohesive style, Glass seeks to explore a huge variety of possibilities in his oeuvre. His paintings vary from meticulous formal portraiture, to cunningly deadpan trompe l'oeil, to bizarre and often disturbing developments of highly personal imagery. So broad is his assault on the possibilities of art-making that he titled a recent exhibition "(One Man) Group Show."

Despite the disparate appearance of Glass' work, a number of themes emerge. The artist expresses these themes through a group of recurring images that he invests with symbolic meaning. One of his favorite images is that of the doll.

"All the dolls I own I have found in the trash," Glass says. His studio in

New York City's Hell's Kitchen conveniently gives him access to all kinds of garbage. "I see them as creatures that I have rescued," he continues. "I think about how each and every doll was once an object of affection and love. When I find them they are often battered and disfigured; and so they become symbolic of our inability to maintain affection as well as the callousness that we are capable of."

One of the artist's most extraordinary paintings in this theme is *At Rest*, which shows a doll lying on a bed of quilted green satin clutching a tiny plastic toy. With its eyes closed and hands quietly at its side, the doll resembles a corpse laid out with all the lurid cosmetic care of a funeral home. The small toy in the doll's hand acts as a final touch of pathos. As with all of Glass' paintings, the rendering is immaculate, the color and tone carefully brushed and blended to secure a hypnotic high-finish realism.

In *Sacrifice of Subject Matter*, Glass is shown in the act of eviscerating a doll with his palette knife. A small boy with angel's wings holds him back

Vanitas

1999, oil, 40 x 42.
Collection the artist.

BELOW

Battle of Jogkith

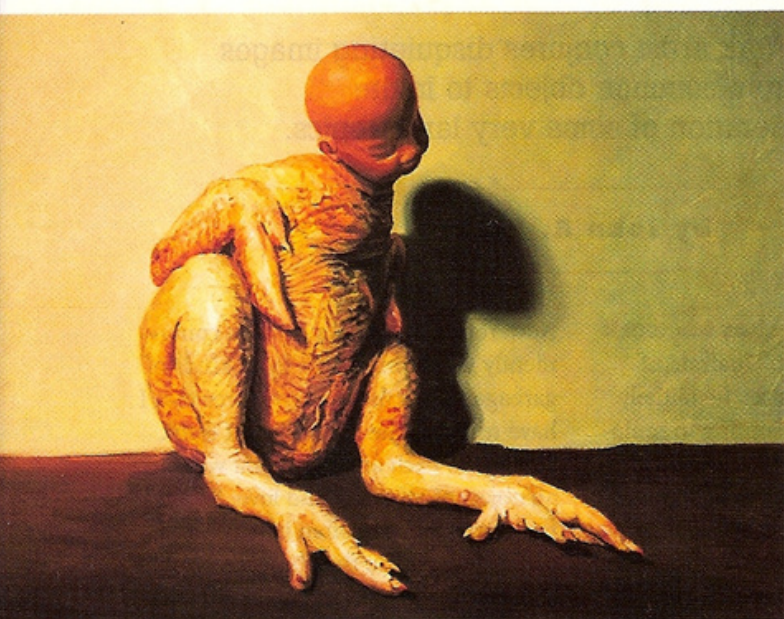
2000, oil, 30 x 66.
Collection the artist.



BOTTOM

Chicken Baby

2004, oil, 16 x 24.
Collection the artist.



RIGHT

At Rest

2004, oil, 32 x 17.
Private collection. This
horizontal image is
reproduced vertically.



from the violent act. The reference is obviously to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, wherein God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son as a sign of his faith. It wasn't until the patriarch had raised his knife that an angel stayed his hand and an animal was provided as a substitute.

Glass often speaks about the drawbacks of being a painter of difficult subjects. The work can be hard to sell and the audience potentially small. For a painter with Glass' extraordinary gifts, the decision to pursue such obsessions can represent a financial sacrifice on the part of the artist's family. In *Sacrifice of Subject Matter*, Glass' son Zachary becomes the angel who

persuades the artist not to kill off one of his favorite images. The depiction, Glass reports, stems from a discussion he had with Zachary regarding the difficulties of his chosen genre, after which the 6-year-old boy encouraged his father to continue with his task.

If the dolls that populate Glass' paintings are commonly battered and dismembered, the fruit he chooses to paint appears to experience a similar kind of suffering. Melons are often dissected in his work; with their peel cut away, the organic shape of the fruit is regularly sacrificed to a more structured geometry. "I see this as symbolic of man's attempt to conquer nature," Glass explains. Also frequently evident are dis-

plays of rubber gloves in a rainbow of colors, which, the artist notes, symbolize the presence of people who are not depicted.

In *Vanitas*, Glass takes up the tradition of making paintings that reflect the mortality of the artist. "The central figure is a homeless man who used to live on my block," the artist says. "He died recently, so I thought it was appropriate to include him as someone who might contact me from across the divide." Glass added his faceted watermelon to the depiction, presumably to symbolize the work of man as he tames nature. But while the artist was working, the melon began to rot and a hideous red hole appeared in it, which

**Sacrifice of
Subject Matter**
2004, oil, 24 x 32.
Private collection.



Glass' pictures retain a lively and forceful surface and a sense of directness, which reinforce the feeling of surprise that so often emanates from the chosen subject matter.

he included in the painting. More than anything else, this bloody, gaping wound seems to suggest the closeness of death—and its taming of man.

Another broad theme is taken up in *Battle of Jorkith*, wherein Glass concocts an epic battle scene bizarrely reminiscent of the works of such Renaissance artists as Paolo Uccello (1397–1475). Here two armies of beings, hilariously constructed from fruit, conduct a pitched battle over two watermel-

ons that have washed up on the shore. A lush landscape and glorious sky recede into the distance behind the action. As the artist notes, the construction of this work was decidedly complex.

"I began by building the scene as a tableau," he says, "and then painting it from life, adding in details from my imagination." Glass, who regards himself as a sculptor as much as a painter, has often considered showing the tableaux he builds for his paintings as

artworks in their own right. "This painting is an image of conflict," he explains. "I wanted it to show how continual it is, how human beings endlessly pursue conflict."

Another theme that continually arises in Glass' work is consumption, particularly a kind of consumption in which there is a deliberate sort of confusion between the consumer and the consumed. In *Chicken Baby*, for instance, the artist paints a doll's head stuck on top of a supermarket chicken to create a novel and most disturbing creature. The food we would choose to eat has been fused with something we would never dream of eating.

The idea is pursued in *Fruit Basket*,

where dolls' heads are mixed up with an enticing array of edible fruits, as though we are being invited to pick one up and munch on it. This cannibalistic notion is taken up again in *Self-consumption*, wherein an entire room of fruit is busy eating fruit. If we extend the idea of consumption to our understanding of society as a whole, the work seems to be saying that, culturally and socially, we all eat one another alive. Spectacularly illustrated in *Spam Man*, one of a group of pictures in which Glass shows human beings with food items substituting for skin, this idea is guaranteed to challenge even the strongest of stomachs.

If some of Glass' paintings take on large themes on a large scale, other works depict favorite symbols involved in more simple visual games. For instance, the artist has made his favorite rubber gloves take on the appearance of flower bouquets in a number of pictures. This game has a flamboyant charm about it, as the viewer's expecta-

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tion of the pleasure of petals—and their alluring fragrance—is subverted by a conflicting reality: the anticipation of the harsh smell of rubber.

Glass pushes the limits of what might be acceptable or rewarding as an image, risking revulsion and unease on the part of the viewer in order to uncover resonant images that have life and impact. "I think that one of the things that art can do is explore images and dreams that are unpleasant, that we might otherwise turn away from," he observes. "An artist can get them out in the open, give them air and light." The enterprise, Glass feels, is purgative and a necessary function of art.



Accordingly, the artist has occasionally done work that addresses the art world itself. In *The Man in the Yellow Hat*, two familiar children's book characters are reworked within passages of quiet classical painting. Here Glass does not allow the painting to speak for itself, but instead mimics the book-illustration format by inserting the lettering, "While the man in the yellow hat pondered the abstract sculpture, George wondered what his friend was looking at." "I know a lot of realist painters who think that painting in an academic, essentially 19th-century manner, is the only way to do things," Glass explains. "For me that is too limiting. I find myself liking all



"They often taste good because of all the other food that has been fried on the griddle beforehand." Unwilling to tie himself down to one preplanned method for building a picture, he proceeds on the principle that he will allow himself any means at all to get the painting to where he wants it to be. To that end he follows a loose painting scheme that allows for variation as the picture progresses. First, he decides on the subject matter and sets it up. He will then take the stretcher frame (without the canvas on it) and construct a grid out of threads across it. He sets this up in front of his subject, so that he can frame exactly the view he wants.

that he keeps the color simple while he masses in the main volumes in the first two passes. He then changes his medium to straight linseed oil and begins building up the paint. In the early stages of the proceedings, Glass uses nylon brushes to work back into the turpentine-soaked washes without lifting them off. Once he changes to linseed, he uses bristle brushes. Since he does not glaze and never changes to a soft brush at the end, Glass' pictures retain a lively and forceful surface and a sense of directness, which reinforce the feeling of surprise that so often emanates from the chosen subject matter.

Glass' fascination with the large life-

LEFT
The Man in the Yellow Hat
2000, oil, 54 x 38.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Spam Man
2004, oil, 74 x 52.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW
Fresh Bouquet
2004, oil, 24 x 38.
Collection the artist.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mikel Glass received a B.A. from Pomona College, in Claremont, California. After college Glass attended the New York Academy of Art, where he earned an M.F.A. before going on to study with Jacob Collins at the National Academy School of Fine Arts, also in New York City. The artist has had numerous solo and group shows, and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Arts & Antiques*, and *The Boston Globe*, among other publications. Glass is represented by galleries in Washington, DC, and San Francisco. His latest solo show will run from September 6 through October 1 at Andre Zarre Gallery, in New York City. For more information on Glass, visit his website: www.mikelglass.com.

kinds of art, from abstract painting to photography to installation sculpture."

As a technician, Glass achieves his results with relatively simple materials and procedures. He uses paint from Utrecht because, he says, he got used to it when he was studying and never wanted to upgrade to something so expensive that it would cause him to worry about its cost when he squeezed the tube. For a support he uses a fine, preprimed Belgian portrait linen, and he paints with brushes from Utrecht and Robert Simmons.

"I think of building a painting as being a bit like getting home fries in a greasy-spoon restaurant," Glass says.

Next, Glass marks a position for his head in front of the frame by using an old cymbal stand from a drum kit with a paintbrush tied to it. Resting his chin on this contrivance, he is able to look through his grid from the same spot all the time. He positions his canvas—temporarily stretched on a piece of board with an identical grid—nearby. He then carefully plots the main outlines of his subject in graphite pencil onto the canvas.

Once the drawing is sufficiently complete, Glass stretches the canvas on the stretcher and begins painting in washes thinned with turpentine. He doesn't use a monochrome underpainting, but says

and-death issues of human existence drives his work, as does the belief that by delving into his unconscious he can produce images that reveal truths about these questions. By fearlessly following his obsessions and dreams, even when they lead him to images that many might find offensive and repugnant, Glass is forging his way into new territory and finding novel ways to deploy his considerable representational skills. ■

John A. Parks is an artist who is represented by Allan Stone Gallery, in New York City. He is also a teacher at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and a frequent contributor to American Artist, Watercolor, and Drawing magazines.