

## Bjarne Melgaard

February 15 – March 15, 2008

Greene Naftali is pleased to announce a new exhibition by infamous Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard. Since the mid-1990s, Melgaard has enacted an art practice that uncomfortably crosses transgressive subcultures (black metal, steroid-infused hardcore gay culture) with a beguiling artistic output. In this, his first major show at Greene Naftali, Melgaard unleashes a "monumental" installation of paintings, drawings, video, a sculptural "novel," and a series of couches designed by Josef Hoffman and Frederick Kiesler with fabric designs by Melgaard (and produced at Backhausen, who made fabric for the Wiener Werkstätte). Adorning the surfaces of these disparate mediums is an unlikely mélange of recirculating tropes: monsters, elephants, men standing in line, chihuahuas, ghosts, male odalisques, and repeated phrases such as "Ben Gazzara," "snuff cubes," and "gay mafia."

Looking across the large paintings in the exhibition, these figurative motifs occur and reoccur. Alternately outlined in cartoonishly simple wide black lines or built up as thick clots of painterly excess, the characters populate ambitiously scaled works that stand in noticeable contrast to popular trends in contemporary painting (i.e. formal restraint, subtle gestures, and emptiness). This cast of characters supplies the canvases with a readymade content that then allows Melgaard to deeply explore the formal and seductive aspects of painting—color, texture, atmosphere—imbuing each canvas with a highly expressive mood, most particularly in Melgaard's use of bright color as a way to extend beyond the more familiar mode of "black" painting as a conveyer of abysmal content. Figures listed as the "gay mafia" are overlaid by "cock monsters," the odalisques by elephants, underlining the transformative slipperiness of words, figures and painterly acts—distorting the lines, literally, between subjectivity and content.

Central to the show is the installation, *Greenland, a novel*. Comprised of an array of rustic Norwegian furniture and antiques, Inuit figurines and drawings, these decorative and historical objects come "readymade" not in terms of production but instead with embedded memory and mystery. Written on sheets of paper and accompanied by Melgaard's own photographs, words and images cover many of the objects' surfaces and surrounding floor, telling a fragmented story of sexual abuse and emotional ambiguity, recalling the verité storytelling of Dogme 95 films. The complexities and problematics of personal human relationships are inserted into an expanded visual-verbal narrative that eschews the vacant idolatry of Pop obsession that typically informs mixed media installation. So too, Melgaard's pornographic video, *Gay Zoo*, aims to rupture the hygienic clarity of gay sexuality's marketed image, again opening a communicative space within the Pop idiom for these awry expressions of human desire and its perversity.

Melgaard's eccentric mix of unsettling content and expressionistic bravado offers a powerful contemporary example of how art can communicate—the collision or inscription of the "self" and culture into each other by irregular formal means—reaching discomfiting emotion in the work's knowing lack of "critical distance" from its content. In a recently published text in *Afterall*, the Norwegian art theorist Ina Blom notes of Melgaard's practice:

The way in which its activation of forces makes it possible to imagine contemporary painting wrought free from the deadlock of eternal self-reflexivity, to think painting very precisely as a practice of hallucinating social relations in the making. Maybe this does not make for the very nicest art around. But it may go some way towards explaining the enduring fascination of an artistic project more difficult than most.

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