



John Baker, *The Best of Both Worlds I*, acrylic and collage on canvas, 26 x 23"



John Baker, *The Best of Both Worlds II*, acrylic and collage on canvas, 26 x 23"

## Master of Illusion

By James Balestrieri

Portraits are meant to depict, to show their subjects as they are; they are also meant to reveal, to betray some inner, other condition that implicates the viewer, that makes the viewer complicit. What the artist reveals to the viewer is something, some quality, that is unknown to, hidden from the subject, the sitter. To gaze at a portrait is to be invited to be in on a secret. "Between you and me..." the artist says, "get a load of this character..." The portrait, if it is a great one, falls in and occupies the gap between what the sitter thinks he or she is, and what the artist sees.

I was hustling uptown, heading to Betsey Johnson (closing forever, it seems, much to my wife's chagrin) to secure something sparkly as a Mother's Day offering. Baubles and bangles

in hand, I paused on my way back to work at the window of the Lumen Gallery at 221 E. 60<sup>th</sup> Street, arrested by that instantaneous reflex that makes me stop to look at a work of art (the same reflex that, when it doesn't kick in, makes me steam on past many galleries). A very kindly, energetic man popped out of the gallery and said, "Come in! Come in! These are my paintings."

Walking round the gallery, the artist, John Baker, described his process, how he creates a collage of found images—magazine photos, printed and textured papers, whatever moves him—sends it to China and orders a painting of a specified size. This painting becomes the canvas for the collage. He adds other fragments to this canvas and paint to obscure, highlight

and link the fragments.

The illusion is painterly, but the process speaks to mass production and mass culture alike, calling into question the notion of originality, of originals and copies, of origins. Apart from the effect of the pieces, the statement they make is that all art is assemblage, fragments of seen and remembered and dreamed images recombined in the new. Art is, by nature, collaborative. Baker's wonderful *I Hear You...* is a harlequinade depicting shades and aspects of womanhood as seen through a patriarchal lens. Botticelli blends with Betty Crocker as alternate personalities, roads not taken, explode and drift away. The sombre faceless man in black at right presides from afar over the proceedings like a distant, harsh deity.



John Baker, *I Hear You...*, acrylic and collage on canvas, 67 x 42"

But Baker's more recent collages, inspired by 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch "tronies"—portraits of unidentified sitters sold as "types" of people—dive deep into contemporary concepts of the self. Instead of the subtle revelations of traditional portraiture, Baker's latest works depict the outer and inner lives of a single unnamed figure at the same time, on different quadrants of the canvas. In *The Best of Both Worlds I* and *II* the temptation is to see the dignified businessman against the backdrop of the skyscraper as the outer man, the serious man, the kind of man who would commission the kind of portrait we are accustomed to see. The other man, on the other hand, with his open plaid shirt and wild hair flying in a wild wind, must be the beatnik in the banker, the poet in the potentate, the lost youth in the shell of the responsible adult. These days, of course, the young man might well be the Internet start-up mogul, grandson of the stuffy banker who might well have been someone else outside the office, outside the city.

Looking at the works in sequence, I wonder what *The Best of Both Worlds III* would look like. Would the young man continue to shove the Brahmin aside? Flattening and separating the cubistic treatment of the individual as represented in the portrait, Baker reveals another completely different person(ality?) in each facet, each dimension.

As our many selves war with one another, crying for attention and vying to be seen on the canvas of our public lives, *The Best of Both Worlds* emerges as an uneasy yoking of cacophonous selves that requires constant struggle. John Baker's wonderful and worthy project seems to suggest that portraiture is impossible, an illusion that the artist, subject and viewer, as co-conspirators, must not only accept, but fabricate.

"These are my paintings," Baker had said. The full weight of what that meant hit me as I walked away carrying my Mother's Day gift, thinking of all the ways I see myself and all the ways others see me, of all that I do and why I do it and who it really belongs to. This is me, I thought. This is my life. Isn't it? ●

When I first saw them, something in them reminded me of the great Venetian painters, the Tiepolos. In Baker's paintings I see the elder Tiepolo's turgid, colorful allegories and

the younger Tiepolo's fascination with the carnival and the mischief-making, melancholy character of Punchinello, whose function is to point the viewer to his or her own follies.

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