

Ashuah Irving Gallery/Boston

John Baker: Recent Collage Paintings

John Baker's work is bathed in the ambiguities one encounters when trying to determine what is or is not a genuine work of art. He uses fragments of other people's paintings, art forgeries that he purchased at an auction house, which he cuts and pastes in collages. The collaged pieces of other people's painting are interspersed with areas of color he lays down with a brush. The resulting works are full of big, bright color and they often juxtapose unlikely elements.

The jolt a roomful of his pictures gives has less to do with the questions of authorship the pictures raise than the slice-and-dice, Vegomatic approach to picturemaking he embraces. Figures locked in a tango are viewed through a prismatic lens that gives each one multiple eyes, noses, mouths, torsos, and limbs. The multiple personality approach harks back to Cubist space, with its infinite variety of views experienced simultaneously.

The dancers in *Tango* seem ready to be swept up the flowing staircase behind them—the stairs lead to a wintry alpine scene that is in contrast to the tropical view we see through the downstairs window. Baker seems to enjoy contrasting climates within the same picture, giving the impression that the figures exist before mere theatrical backdrops, rather than within the logical continuity of the real world.

There's an overall surreal sense of playfulness in Baker's images. In *Bottle Dance*, a woman costumed in a fruit salad of birds, vegetables, and flowers frolics in a painterly landscape. In *The Household*, a man in a red robe wears a miniature church on his head in place of a bishop's miter. In *Sheila's Revelation*, a woman with multiple eyes, noses, and mouths poses within a snowy landscape with lush greenery in the background. A woman who resembles a Barbie doll is juxtaposed to wispy, painted women—at work and contemplative—in *Thoughts of Thailand*. *Portrait of Dave M.* depicts a bowler letting go with a speedy shot toward the ten pins as he looks beatifically toward the viewer.

The participants in Baker's paintings seem caught between the fragmented worlds they inhabit, expressing a variety of moods and personae. It's as if the artist is trying to express the multiple levels of human consciousness that refuse to be locked down to one precise meaning.

Likewise, Baker's paintings resist a singular definition. With all their art-historical crosscutting and kinetic zip, they bob and weave, refusing to stand in one place for very long. They also require that we address some disquieting issues: Is a forgery a lesser work than one by a master? What if the forgery goes undetected and is as satisfying to its owner as the real thing?

Baker's collages raise a bundle of interesting issues. He will probably continue so long as he can create fresh ideas and the auction houses can provide him with raw material

—Paul Porcellini