



David Ostrem, *Taking Acid* (1987), coloured pencil on paper, 56 x 76 cm, photo: Jim Jardine

**David Ostrem
Or Gallery**

Vancouver
October 27 to November 7

"Psychedelic Pictures", David Ostrem's first solo exhibition in three years, is a significant departure from the genteel inquietude of stylistic clashes found in his previous silk-screens of still lifes and interiors. This show offers two large oil paintings and 10 colour pencil drawings; all are dated 1987 with the exception of two previously unexhibited drawings from 1985.

The title of this show immediately comes into question. The works bear more resemblance to de Chirico than to '60s psychedelic design with its vacillating influences from Op art, Hindu mandalas, and art nouveau. However, Ostrem does have more than an interest in blurring distinctions between high and low art; the new works are *pittura metafisica* infected by American popular art and iconography.

The theme of these pictures, we are led to believe, is the chemically altered

experience. Metaphor is the product of the perceiver and these works suggest numerous other possible readings. It might be that the artist has chosen the title for lack of more precise vocabulary or, more probably, to avoid an appearance of pretension. Ostrem's humour, irony, and pose of naïveté are refreshing but could also be seen as a defensive measure in an art world that expects artists to be their own critics.

Taking Acid is the first drawing in the show, installed in the makeshift foyer of the temporary Or Gallery. Beneath a sky punctuated by a sunny-side-up, greasy fried midday sun stands a hybrid character in the act of "dropping acid". His face is green and he sports a mohawk hairdo, yet the zig-zag pattern on his sweater says he is the illegitimate product of an unholy encounter between Archie Andrews and Charlie Brown. The medium disarms the lunacy of the subject with its evocation of one's first pack of Laurentian pencil colours. Truth to materials means that Ostrem never colours over the lines.

Oil painting is the most recent medium this artist has added to a repertoire that includes photography and video. The centrepiece of this show is the large painting, *Mentally Retarded Person Accidentally Takes Three Hits of LSD*. An interior scene of a kitchen in a style that might be called day-glo Carrà, it describes a showroom-dummy of a man, with the fixed eyes of someone lost in inner space, sitting at a yellow table that defies the conventions of perspective. The objects that surround him food, appliances, a clock are all rendered with a vibrancy that asserts their existence on an equal plane to that of the unfortunate protagonist. A black doorway behind the figure is pierced by a crisp white word balloon that asks "Where's Bill?" The inherent cruelty and bad taste of the title fades as the wonder and humour of the scene take over. There is nothing condescending about Ostrem's intent; it's clear that he feels no more than an obvious, unqualified difference from the subject.

Crazy Inside, Crazy Outside is a *nature morte* that bears an uncanny resemblance to Alberto Savinio's *Alphabetical Morning* of 1929. Strong verticals and horizontals delineate window and

table, stabilizing the epileptic atmosphere of the exterior and the hysterical vase and bouquet that sit inside. This piece establishes a dialectical poetic that continues through the majority of the pictures. A ludicrous sun reigns over many of the tableaux. *The Sun Goes Crazy* is a portrait of the absurd, self-consuming star. Sweating dog-like through a drooping tongue, the flabbergasted sun is anthropomorphized in generic cartoon fashion. The Italian architecture of de Chirico's *Mystery and Melancholy of the Street* finds a sympathetic counterpart in Ostrem's recurring Crazy Kat pueblos (in the past, Ostrem experimented with clay sculptures of this motif). *Sitting on the Moon, Contemplating the Sun* is a desert sunset: a pueblo is positioned centre-stage Ostrem's allegorical vision is essentially theatrical and brought into relief by long shadows that loom into the foreground. This work, and the next two that I will mention, constitute a respite from the madness of the day perpetrated, or at least symbolized, by the sulphur orb.

Both literally and metaphorically, it is safer indoors. In *Smoking Marijuana in the Park*, the familiar besuited dummy (possibly a self-portrait) sits framed by two grimacing trees, emigrés from Ronald McDonald Land. Although the sun and moon both appear in the sky, they don't have much effect on the smoker's idyll. André Breton once wrote, "The smoker puts the last touch to his work, he seeks unity between himself and the landscape." *Innerspace* continues the theme of the smoker's project; a sunless, lazy sky of blue with French curved clouds floats past a reclining architecture that bears the inscription "Mindland".

Ostrem's respect for his popular sources belies the distinctly postmodern sensibility of his project. In contrast to the pop art of the '60s, where 'vulgar' mass culture imagery was elevated to high art status, these works are cocktail parties where cubism and Crazy Kat mingle on equal terms. The intent of this Hanna-Barbera semiotics is not deconstructive as much as it is reconstructive; nor are the heterogeneous styles and images layered into visual noise à la Polke. Instead, an idiosyncratic synthesis is achieved that recalls the wild hybrids of folk art and *l'art brut*.

Roy Arden

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