



NEW YORK E-MAIL

LETTERS FROM DAVID HUMPHREY  
James Esber at PPOW, 12 October-13 November  
R. Crumb at PAUL MORRIS, 1 November-5 December  
Peter Saul at NOLAN/ECKMAN, 1 November-5 December

The fleshy, wrinkled forms in James Esber's paintings appear obscene, even when they depict an innocent bunny or small piece of clothing. Both *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* cite R. Crumb and Peter Saul as Esber's precursors, but all three are part of a tradition of the grotesque that goes back to antiquity. They incline to forms that I would describe as scrotal. Esber's images of a woman flashing her breasts, a hobo roasting a hot dog, and an entangled cluster of figures are rendered with a vigor and lewdness that conforms to Michael Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque as "ordinary life turned into amusing and ludicrous monstrosities." Like Crumb and Saul, Esber is a practiced stylist with an illustrator's eye for emphatic details and corpulent idiosyncrasy. Unlike them, however, Esber makes images that are not easy to recognize. His bodies are tangles of intersecting fragments and subdivisions that strain against coherence; they are catastrophes whose disorder and incompleteness challenge our ability to describe what is going on. Esber engages and undermines conventions, stereotypes, and habits of seeing by pictorial shifts, subdivisions, and exaggeration. His very American imagery is folksy, as if imagined by a pornographic Norman Rockwell. *Hobo* (all works, 2000) is, in fact, derived from Rockwell's *Hobo* of 1928. Cuteness, innocence, and lovability are mercilessly burlesqued in this work. Esber's bodies are engaged in a civil war with themselves; each part is rendered separately, drawn as a differently colored autonomous region. His people are patch-jobs of heterogeneous parts; composites held together by tight nests of hatched lines and constraining contours. The almost cut-out image floats like a decal on a bruised or stained back-

ground. Other works, such as *Biggy Small*, dispense with the background altogether. These images are rendered in colored plasticine that is dabbed and smeared directly on the wall. The abundant interior of the figures, with their puckered and bulging volumes, becomes island worlds surrounded by the milky blankness of the gallery wall. Such denser works don't subdivide themselves like Esber's paintings but more insistently dramatize the incongruity between their methodical hand-wrought rendering and woody distorted imagery. *Self-Portrait Fourstone* (1999-2000) pictures a boy with his tongue out in absorbed concentration, as he draws on the back of another boy, who is having sex with a third, to which a fourth is ambiguously attached from behind. Viewers must mentally untangle the images, pry them apart and reassemble them, in order to construct pictorial sense. Like all monsters, this one is erotic and unethical in ways that resemble our fluctuating self-image. The inconsistencies of seeing, being seen, wanting, doing, and making become knitted into a great copulatory cluster. R. Crumb has been living in France, where he has taken to drawing on restaurant placemats. He is a deft observer of personality and character type; an observer of how haircuts are always slightly ridiculous. Crumb can render a person's disposition and style of dress with hilarious economy. His characteristic cross-hatched line gives all his characters a funny shagreened that seems to express both affection and mockery. With his restaurant drawings, Crumb performs the social trick of establishing contact while keeping people at a distance. One gets the feeling that the activity of drawing, for Crumb, is a form of compulsive behavior

that helps him to inhabit a world that is otherwise never quite comfortable for him. His new work feels habitual and automatic, as though doodling is not a matter of choice—which is not to diminish their charm or accomplished wit. Crumb alternates between drawing the people or places around him and exercising his well-rehearsed comic-book skills. He's exerted an impressive and sustaining influence on gallery and comic-book artists for decades and now seems to be enjoying himself, and why not? He returns again and again to the sexual preoccupations, narcissistic or paranoid anxieties, social observation and worship of favorite musicians that fans expect from him. The works are sometimes stained with food or torn casually from larger sheets, but their public address is confirmed by carefully placed captions and dates. Crumb's drawings fulfil another of Bakhtin's definitions of the grotesque: "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body." These drawings seem to savor such a fall, but Crumb diverts the placemat's final passing into garbage with his signature ink stains.

Peter Saul's paintings respect very little but the ability of a picture to fully arrest attention. His flamboyant language of mockery and exaggeration howls for a response. The paintings are spatially vehement; pneumatic forms aggressively swell to the limits of the picture and push out toward the viewer. The flat pictures seem to barely contain Saul's hyperbolic bodies that insist so strongly on provoking laughs or outrage. His new paintings of heads sustain the giddy ferocity that has characterized his work for almost forty years without the heavy machinery of narrative. The familiar genre of portraiture highlights the unpredictable and elastic character of his inventions.

The unruly abundance of Saul's individuals strains against the methodical way they are painted. Saul has developed a dabbling snark, a fuzzy dot, with which he builds his forms in small increments toward their glowing highlights. His manner of painting is caring and careful, a finely wrought radiance and deft articulation of form paradoxically supports the image's pushy vulgarity. The swollen heads behave like endomorphic goo, as insiders incontinently squeeze out in the form of sweat, drool, and pimples. Orifices migrate across faces

with mutilating freedom, while tidy marks make sure everything is properly located. In *Cold Sweat* (1999), the inflamed featureless head is nothing but blennish bulges and over-sized nuclei of perspiration. Saul's devotional labors peoples the aversion his images seem intent on provoking. The head in *Man Looking for a Bathroom* (2000) appears about to burst open, while urine issues from its scalp. The guy depicted in *I'm Wrong/So What* (2000) sports a shit-eating grin on his cuboid tooth-erupting face. He's the uncool Mr. Cool, with a two-toned haircut, mouse-turd facial hair, and suave praid jacket. A rhinogale eye drips over his head, angular brow. He stands in for the belligerently independent artist who affects not to give a damn what critics have to say.

The literary critic Hugh Kenner writes, "A grotesque is an energy which asserts, as if to express its dissatisfaction with available boundaries." Esber, Crumb, and Saul celebrate their maladjusted boy-selves as a blow to the status quo. They each require familiar conventions in their work, with available boundaries to be pulverized, in order to exercise their demolition, irresponsibility, and emphatic acts of creation.

David Humphrey is a painter who shows at Miché Gallery. His New York e-mail appears regularly in Art issues.



James Esber  
*Self-Portrait Fourstone*  
Pneumatic forms aggressively swell to the limits of the picture and push out toward the viewer.

R. Crumb  
*Self-Portrait Fourstone*  
Pneumatic forms aggressively swell to the limits of the picture and push out toward the viewer.

Peter Saul  
*Man Looking for a Bathroom*  
Pneumatic forms aggressively swell to the limits of the picture and push out toward the viewer.

# NEW YORK E-MAIL ART ISSUES, JAN/FEB, 2001

Mon, Dec. 4 '00 11:05:45 from David Humphrey

James Esber at PPOW  
R. Crumb at Paul Morris  
Peter Saul at Nolan/Eckman

The fleshy, wrinkled forms in James Esber's paintings appear obscene, even when they depict an innocent bunny or small piece of clothing. Both *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* cite R. Crumb and Peter Saul as Esber's precursors, but all three are part of a tradition of the grotesque that goes back to antiquity. They incline to forms that I would describe as scrotal. Esber's images of a woman flashing her breasts, a hobo roasting a hot dog, and an entangled cluster of figures are rendered with a vigor and lewdness that conforms to Michael Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque as "ordinary life turned into amusing and ludicrous monstrosities." Like Crumb and Saul, Esber is a practiced stylist with an illustrator's eye for emphatic details and corpulent idiosyncrasy.

Unlike them, however, Esber makes images that are not easy to recognize. His bodies are tangles of intersecting fragments and subdivisions that strain against coherence; they are catastrophes whose disorder and incompleteness challenge our ability to describe what is going on. Esber engages and undermines conventions, stereotypes, and habits of seeing by pictorial shifts, subdivisions, and exaggeration. His very American imagery is folksy, as if imagined by a pornographic Norman Rockwell. *Hobo* (all works, 2000) is, in fact, derived from Rockwell's *Hobo* of 1928. Cuteness, innocence, and lovability are mercilessly burlesqued in this work. Esber's bodies are engaged in a civil war with themselves; each part is rendered separately, drawn as a differently colored autonomous region. His people are patch-jobs of heterogeneous parts; composites held together by tight nests of hatched lines and constraining contours. The almost cut-out image floats like a decal on a bruised or stained background. Other works, such as *Biggy Small*, dispense with the background altogether. These images are rendered in colored plasticine that is dabbed and smeared directly on the wall. The abundant interior of the figures, with their puckered and bulging volumes, becomes island worlds surrounded by the milky blankness of the gallery wall. Such denser works don't subdivide themselves like Esber's paintings but more insistently dramatize the incongruity between their methodical hand-wrought rendering and

woozily distorted imagery.

Self-Portrait Foursome (1999-2000) pictures a boy with his tongue out in absorbed concentration, as he draws on the back of another boy, who is having sex with a third, to which a fourth is ambiguously attached from behind. Viewers must mentally untangle the images, pry them apart and reassemble them, in order to construct pictorial sense. Like all monsters, this one is erratic and unwhole in ways that resemble our fluctuating self-image. The inconsistencies of seeing, being seen, wanting, doing, and making become knotted into a great copulatory cluster.

R. Crumb has been living in France, where he has taken to drawing on restaurant placemats. He is a deft observer of personality and character type; an observer of how haircuts are always slightly ridiculous. Crumb can render a person's disposition and style of dress with hilarious economy. His characteristic crosshatched line gives all his characters a lumpy shagginess that seems to express both affection and mockery. With his restaurant drawings, Crumb performs the social trick of establishing contact while keeping people at a distance. One gets the feeling that the activity of drawing, for Crumb, is a form of compulsive behavior that helps him to inhabit a world that is otherwise never quite comfortable for him. His new work feels habitual and automatic, as though doodling is not a matter of choice – which is not to diminish their charm or accomplished wit.

Crumb alternates between drawing the people or places around him and exercising his well-rehearsed comic-book skills. He's exerted an impressive and sustaining influence on gallery and comic-book artists for decades and now seems to be enjoying himself, and why not? He returns again and again to sexual preoccupations, narcissistic or paranoid anxieties, social observation and worship of favorite musicians that fans expect from him. The works are sometimes stained with food or torn casually from larger sheets, but their public address is confirmed by carefully placed captions and dates. Crumb's drawings fulfill another of Bakhtin's definitions of the grotesque: "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body." These drawings seem to savor such a fall, but Crumb diverts the placemat's final passing into garbage with his signature ink stains.

Peter Saul's paintings respect very little but the ability of a picture to fully arrest attention. His flamboyant language of mockery and exaggeration howls for a response. The paintings are spatially vehement; pneumatic forms aggressively swell to the limits of the picture and push out toward the viewer. The flat pictures seem to barely contain Saul's hyperbolic bodies that insist so strongly on provoking laughs or outrage. His new paintings of heads sustain the goofy ferocity that has characterized his work for almost forty years without the heavy machinery of narrative. The familiar genre of portraiture highlights the unpredictable and elastic character of his inventions.

The unruly abundance of Saul's individuals strains against the methodical way they are painted. Saul has developed a dabbing mark, a fuzzy dot, with which he builds his forms in small increments toward their glowing highlights. His manner of painting is caring and careful; a finely wrought radiance and deft articulation of form paradoxically supports the image's pushy vulgarity. The swollen heads behave like endomorphic goo, as insides incontinently squeeze out in the form of sweat, drool, and pimples. Orifices migrate across faces with mutilating freedom, while tidy marks make sure everything is properly located. In Cold Sweat (1999), the inflamed featureless head is nothing but blemished bulges and oversized rivulets of perspiration. Saul's devotional labors perplex the aversion his images seem intent on provoking. The head in Man Looking for a Bathroom (2000) appears about to burst open, while urine oozes from its scalp. The guy depicted in I'm Wrong/So What (2000) sports a shit-eating grin on his cuboid two-toned haircut, mouse-turd facial hair, and suave plaid jacket. A fried-egg-like eye drips over his hard, angular brow.

The literary critic Hugh Kenner writes, "A grotesque is an energy which aborts, as if to express its dissatisfaction with available boundaries." Esber, Crumb, and Saul celebrate their maladjusted boy-selves as a blow to the status quo. They each require familiar conventions in their work, with available boundaries to be pulverized, in order to exercise their dereliction, irresponsibility, and emphatic acts of creation.

David Humphrey is a painter who shows at McKee Gallery. His New York e-mail appears regularly in Art Issues.