

The fine art of distortion

Normal images get twisted, sliced, stacked in the studio of an artist whose work is in a one-man show at SECCA

By Tom Patterson
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James Esber developed a fascination for distorted imagery 20 years ago, shortly after he moved to New York to start his art career. As a newcomer to the city, Esber spent much of his time making drawings. During that transitional period, he ran across a book about anamorphic projection — the distortion of objects so that they appear normal only from a particular view or through the use of a special lens or mirror. The book inspired him to start making distorted renderings of images. This approach has been central to his art ever since.

Iconic or emotionally charged images from the Internet and other sources serve as starting points for his drawings and paintings. Knish fig-

ures, wrecked cars, posing body-builders, erotic couplings and the faces of well-known people are extremely distorted and elaborately embellished in his works, which have been shown at prominent art venues in New York and Europe since the mid-1990s.

The Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art organized Esber's latest exhibition, which has the largest selection of his art ever in one show. Titled "American Delirium," and on view through April 7, it brings together 26 of the pieces he has produced since 1998. During a recent trip to Winston-Salem to help install the show and attend its opening reception, Esber discussed his work, its origins and its continuing development. Growing up in Ohio, he developed an interest in art and a talent for drawing at an early

age, even though his family's suburban household was "not particularly cultured or sophisticated," he said.

At the Cleveland Institute of Art, he said, he received a solid foundation in figure-drawing, thanks in part to a year he spent in Italy under the school's auspices. He received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the institute in 1984.

Recalling his discovery of anamorphic projections about two years later, he said, "What struck me about them was the fact that they were recognizable but not representational. They had stopped functioning properly as accurate representations and had become objects in themselves."

Esber said that his interest in distortion led to an interest in "the physical plasticity of images." He explored both interests in a series of images he painted on pliable fabric that he then stretched to distort the images, and sewed together to stabilize the distortions.

Making these quilt-like pieces occupied him through the first half of the 1990s, he said. He abandoned this approach in 1997, after discovering plasticine, a form of modeling clay that remains malleable over time. Realizing that he could also use it in the same way he used paint, he began applying different colors to walls or other surfaces, manipulating it by hand to reproduce two-dimensional images, albeit in a highly distorted, twisted form.

Among the plasticine pieces in Esber's SECCA show are distorted portraits of pop singer Michael Jackson and president Nixon and Lincoln.

Around the time he started working with plasticine, he began using a computer to systematically distort the images on

which he bases his work. "It's become really invaluable as a tool," he said. "Every piece I work on goes through some phase of development on it. The computer allows me to work much faster and more intuitively."

In creating his drawings and paintings, he said, he focuses his attention narrowly on details, frequently altering and elaborating on them fancifully while disregarding the overall image. "I draw them one little part at a time, without concerning myself about proportions, and from time to time I'll change the style," he said. "This creates a certain disjointedness and opens up the space within the image. It also introduces visual ambiguities and guess-queries that weren't evident in the original image."

The SECCA exhibition includes four such acrylic paintings and seven such drawings. The drawings are all variations on a familiar portrait of Osama Bin Laden.

The paintings and some of the plasticine pieces also incorporate another strategy that Esber introduced in his work around 2000 — juxtaposing fragments of two or more images to create a single composite image.

The incongruity of their juxtapositions is so extreme as to make these works unrecognizable and resistant to interpretation. In the plasticine piece titled *Reservoir*, for ex-

ample, a vertical slice of a glistening man's torso is sandwiched between part of a demolished car and the head and arms of a little girl holding a bouquet of flowers.

"I'm not interested in those parts adding up to anything," Esber said. "I look for things that fit together and balance each other but don't make sense together. Each image provides a context for the other image that doesn't allow it to be understood."

Despite the intentional incomprehensibility of his jammed-together image fragments, Esber said he is interested in the experience of trying to logically resolve them.

"The joy of looking at art has to do largely with trying to construct meaning from an object," he said. "And it's the viewer who constructs the meaning, not the artist."

■ James Esber's exhibition "American Delirium" is on view at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art through April 7. An art show by Bill Fisk and Lynn Bink. Also on view is a group show of large paintings that viewers can see gradually being created on the gallery walls between now and July 8. SECCA is at 750 Margaret Drive. For more information, call 725-1904.

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See DISTORTED, Page F5

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THE FINE ART OF DISTORTION, WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL, JANUARY 28, 2007

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Iconic or emotionally charged images from the Internet and other sources serve as starting points for his drawings and paintings. Kitsch figurines, wrecked cars, posing body-builders, erotic couplings and the faces of well-known people are extremely distorted and elaborately embellished in his works, which have been shown in prominent art venues in New York and Europe since the mid-1990s.

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During a recent trip to Winston-Salem to help install the show and attend its opening reception, Esber discussed his work, its origins and its continuing development. Growing up in Ohio, he developed an interest in art and a talent for drawing at an early age, even though his suburban household was "not particularly cultured or sophisticated," he said.

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The incongruity of their juxtapositions is so extreme as to make these works unresolvable and resistant to interpretation. In the plasticine piece titled Bouquet, for example, a vertical slice of glistening muscleman’s body is sandwiched between part of a demolished car and the head and arm of a little girl holding a bouquet of flowers.

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