

ARTFORUM

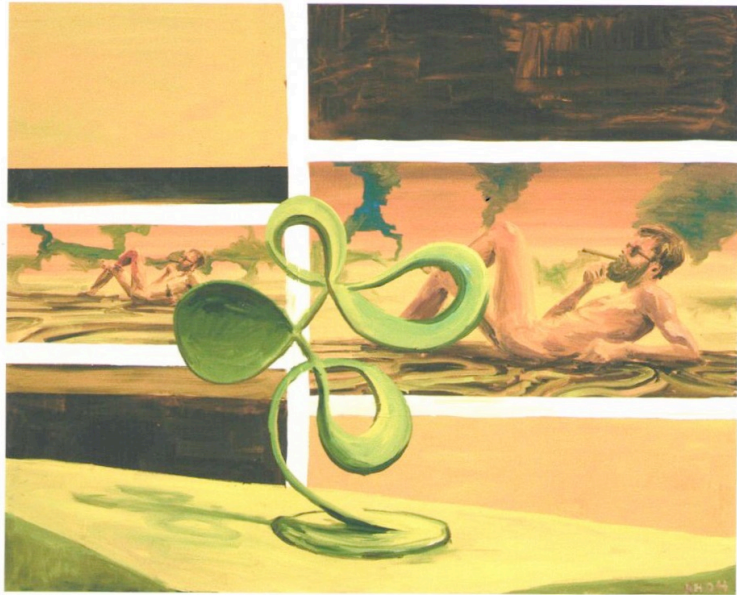
MARCH 2005

ANTON HENNING

CHRISTOPHER GRIMES
GALLERY

Aptly, if dramatically, titled “Tragedy, Sunburns & Still-lives,” Anton Henning’s second exhibit of paintings at Christopher Grimes Gallery meditated on the materiality and intensity of life. And while these images offer hints of *vanitas*, one often also finds in them a sense of indulgence in the present moment. Henning positions himself as an heir to all those whose work has displayed a flair for the lush and the strange, from the painters of the Baroque to Courbet, Manet, the post-Impressionists, Matisse, and more recently, the likes of Sigmar Polke, Eric Fischl, and David Salle. Borrowing style and reference promiscuously, Henning advances an approach to painting that is unapologetically figurative and evidences a real pleasure in the materials and processes employed.

It’s not that the paintings shown, made during 2002–2004, are over-the-top or explicit. Rather, they simply seem at ease with the retinal, material, and intellectual pleasures they offer. Implying neither struggle nor casualness, they seem more the products of someone who has no difficulty getting into a groove. Henning seems comfortable in his own skin, delivering a glimpse (over the subject’s sunburnt shoulder) of a supernova sun. He accompanies this work with a separate canvas in which a sun burning in a blue sky is seen from a retina-frying, dead-on point of view. Henning turns up again, looking equal parts hedonist and old-fashioned romantic, in *Blumenstilleben No. 184*, 2004, in which he doubles the pleasure via two duplicated images of himself in sunglasses, smoking a Castro-worthy cigar and reclining buck naked beneath a sky as orange as his skin.



Anton Henning, *Blumenstilleben No. 184*, 2004
oil on canvas, 55-1/2 x 68 inches (AH134)

Venus/Olympia basks in a landscape that is anomalous or ambiguous. One isn’t sure if the backgrounds are photographs or color-field painting, or if the dark, cloudy sky reveals a stormy sunset, the smoggy glow of oil fires, or the aftermath of an apocalypse. And it remains equally unclear whether the swirling lines beneath the figure represent the pattern of a beach blanket or the ridges and valleys of a dwarfed landscape. Stranger still is the way in which these twin nude self-portraits not only occur within the same painting but also are backdrops within it. Appearing to hang on a wall in an illusionistically rendered space, they drop away behind what appears to be an abstract sculpture based on a plantlike motif called a “henning” (hence the painting’s title, which translates as “flower still life”) sitting on a table in the foreground.

Such combinations recur frequently in Henning’s works, wherein instances of the broad quotation of disjunctive imagery and styles are handled not through layering and juxtaposition but rather via spatially logical if circumstantially unexpected arrangements. What appear to be monochrome nude pinups or photographs of interiors, or perhaps actual figures and rooms dramatically lit, drop away behind objects that range from familiar to abstracted to simply undefined. Occasionally, in nods to Guston and Magritte, the paintings picture canvases stacked up into still lifes or transformed into tabletops and floors. Delivering neither chaos nor the bizarre, Henning instead reshuffles rich imagery and allows one to get lost in the pleasure of trying to make sense of it all.

- Christopher Miles