

Mark Braunias

b.1955

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For years it was feared that popular culture would infiltrate and corrupt the sanctity of high art. Mark Braunias sees this as his mission. His dizzying paintings are jammed with pop cultural references and forms that undermine any sense of art's preciousness or separation from the real world.

The Entourage is a riotous mash of cartoon-like forms and figures stuffed into a single frame that struggles to contain them. Art historical references remain, but are made over in bizarre new ways. The gooey intestine form that slithers into the top of the composition is a distant relative of modern art's biomorphic abstraction. Like all of Braunias's forms, it has lost any sense of purpose or direction. These figures and forms are left to comically roll and bounce around inside the composition, constantly jostling for attention or meaning.

The viewer is placed in a similar position. Braunias dispenses with a centralised composition that would grant a sense of control to the viewer. His all-over composition has no central focus or points of emphasis. We are unable to take in all the action at once. Something is always tugging at the periphery of our vision, or seems to have repositioned itself when we weren't looking. This sense is heightened when viewing an entire exhibition of Braunias's paintings. They always seem to run amok in the gallery space.

Processing this painting is equally difficult. It almost challenges the viewer to provide a concise and coherent explanation of what's going on. Rational and ordered responses are rendered useless. The painting demands that we surrender to its own internal rules and logic, governed by its peculiar shapes, rhythms and energies.

The Entourage doesn't quite function as we are told paintings should. But bearings can be found in other cultural forms. The creation of a madcap world of bulbous shapes and goggle-eyed characters shares a lot with cartoons and comic books. Braunias's overlaying of forms and images on a plain background resembles graffiti or wall drawing. In fact the artist does sometimes paint directly onto gallery walls, liberating his figures from the frame and the polite conventions of high art. An earlier self-portrait as a guitarist also suggests that the improvisational nature of Braunias's painting may have connections with music.

Drawing is fundamental to Braunias's working method. Many artists use drawing as a means to loosen up their practice. Braunias seems to use drawing as a form of control, a way of harnessing his forms. Animated rhythm and a sense of movement are created through their tension and release. This explains the resemblance between the painting and a large sketchpad that has collected various marks and doodling.

The Entourage is a heady regurgitation of all of these practices and forms. Like the transitory world depicted in *The Entourage*, Braunias's art is about moving between and across practices; across boundaries and ideas of good and bad taste. Painting is made to look like drawing. Abstraction meets figuration. Tragedy and comedy shake hands. *The Entourage* suggests that there is energy, humour and vitality to be found in this precious state of the in-between.

Aaron Lister

Artist website:

www.markbraunias.co.nz

Galleries and museums:

www.artbash.co.nz

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.bathstreetgallery.com

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.jonathansmartgallery.com

Articles:

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