

# ARTnews

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## RICK PROL

Hal Bromm, B-Side

PROL'S BATTERY of large, loud acrylic paintings, recently shown in this two-gallery exhibition, demonstrated that depictions of human suffering can be lightweight. The canvases presented in histrionic fashion the grisly afflictions of a small cast of archetypal, and apparently sadomasochistic, urban dwellers. Silhouetted against landscapes of screaming Day-Glo skies and decaying tenements, the figures' spaghetti-like limbs twitch across the canvases in a contorted dance of death. From painting to painting, these attenuated grotesqueries are further punished by blindfolds, lacerations, dismemberment, disembowelment and knives through the neck. Prol's aggressive, often sophisticated painterly technique provides a dazzling counterpoint to his repellent imagery. His ravagings of the human form, while ostensibly a portrayal of urban brutality, suggest rather the parricidal fantasies of a psychotic child.



Rick Prol, *Garbage*, 1984, acrylic on linen, 108 by 78 inches. Hal Bromm.

Prol, one of several young artists to gain attention by way of the East Village gallery boom, falls squarely within the ever-expanding camp of Neo-Expressionism. As an unambiguous example of that genre, Prol's work reads as a reasonably coherent pastiche of its major characteristics: his lurid complementary colors and black outlines recall the early 20th-century Expressionists, especially Kirchner; his stylized figures mimic children's drawings and *art brut*; and his scraped, scumbled and overlaid surfaces imitate the "hot" brushwork of Abstract Expressionism. Like many of his Neo-Expressionist counterparts, Prol presents an apocalyptic vision of late capitalism's sundry horrors. His mutilated bodies are both victims and perpetrators of ghetto violence—the dehumanized progeny of cultural desolation. Also like many of his Neo-Expressionist peers, Prol self-consciously straddles the line between seriousness and parody. This ambivalence—about art making as well as subject matter—reflects a contemporary sensibility but undermines the work's ability to function as a catharsis for human despair in the face of the world's evils.

The plight of Prol's sliced and diced cartoon figures is too fantastic to serve as serious social commentary. This was especially evident at B-Side Gallery, where the paintings hung from dirty lathing, and ghetto flotsam lined the walls. Eerie lighting and music completed the effect—not of slum life's impoverishment and raw ugliness but of the spine-tingling thrills and chills of a creep show. This playful attitude toward the paintings' installation underscored the fact that their brutalization of the human figure is a vulgar, violent joke—a caricature of, rather than a testimony to, human suffering.

—N.G.