

BROOKLYN RAIL

Critical perspectives on arts, politics, and culture

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Rick Prol The Metamorphosis Maya Stendhal Gallery

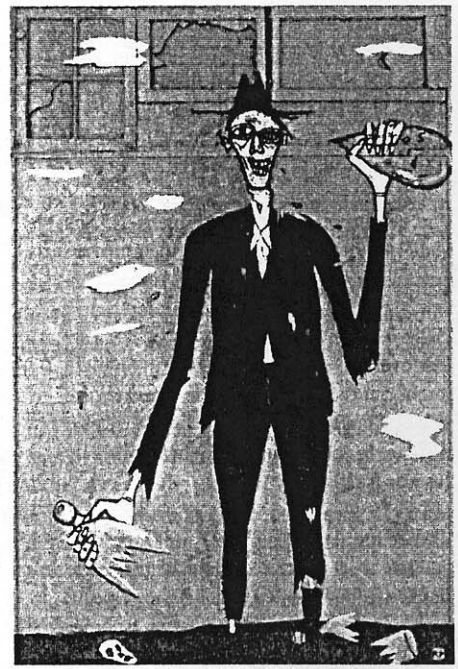
From the perspective of 2003, the East Village art scene of the go-go eighties may seem a quaint golden age, a time when superstardom was within reach for anyone who would take the risk, face the challenges, and get the work out there. Some of the most renowned “made it,” but didn’t survive it. Excruciating anxiety and stress were the dark side of the manic quest for fame. Doubt and the fear of missing your shot at the big times crushed many an ego.

A single ragged contorted figure, tattered black suit, a face barely more than a shrieking skull with a hide like rancid goat cheese, one or both arms held up, meat hook hands clutching broken bottles or knives. This is the recurrent figure that appears wraith like in the *Metamorphosis* series, a group of paintings by Rick Prol. Since bursting onto the art scene with the rise of the East Village, the art-viewing public has become familiar with his world of neo-Expressionistic angst. Times and fashions change. Neo-Expressionism is superseded by Neo Geo, Post-Conceptual, Kindergarten Pop, and Nauty Girl Feminism, but Prol continues his investigation of painterly figuration. With some of these paintings taking over fifteen years, a kind of dogged persistence is paying off. When asked about the identity of the painted character, the artist stated, “I think it’s a kind of victim/victimizer. He’s very aggressive but vulnerable and obviously it goes back to early trauma, and now I can work it out. It’s not therapeutic. It’s not like I go to therapy with the paintings. Therapy is therapy, and painting is painting.” Admittedly there is a bit of over the top absurdity in the subject matter, a kind of dark humor. However, to my eye, the greatest development is the rich coloristic grounds and subtle tonal shifts in the accumulations of pigments.

In “Metamorphosis I,” (1986-92) we find the figure in the corner of a ratty apartment, the gaseous yellow walls punctuated with two windows. Through the left, shades of dark green, perhaps downtown at dusk. The right is a noxious sunset in rusty vermilion. Large shards of broken bottles tumble to the floor, while a tiny sink on exposed pipes hangs off the wall like a poisonous toadstool on a spindly stem. In several paintings, the image of the window is replaced by the actuality: Prol attaches frames with broken glass to the canvases. Paint subsumes the entire surface, glass and all, and a reference to repainted, rotting woodwork in blighted neighborhoods is apparent. “Metamorphosis VI” (1986-87) is the anomaly of this group. With no architectural allusion, our perpetrator is (shades of Hieronymus Bosch) lashed to a large orange and yellow wheel, a downcast arm and the lower legs are suspended in gray murky waters that meld into a leaden sky. The moon appears in a red square, like a postage stamp in the upper right. A punishment for crimes committed, or the self-imposed torture of artistic doubt? “Occam’s Razor” (2003) is a major departure. This large assemblage sculpture depicts a squirming highbred demon-cat and squid riding a bicycle, its twisting arms holding clubs, guns, and flashlights, the offspring no doubt of a mutant terrorist force, open for business 24/7. With its dozens of variously sized studies in mixed media, Prol here shows his sculptural savvy.

Prol’s “Metamorphosis” may not allude only to Kafka’s short story, but to the painter himself, an East Village wunderkind who has now, through perseverance, transformed himself into a mature artist.

—James Kalm



Rick Prol, “Metamorphosis II” (1987-2002), oil on linen with wood, and glass. Courtesy of Maya Stendhal Gallery.