

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

ANSEL KRUT

1/20/10

MODERN ART

JAN 15 – FEB 13, 2010

by colin perry

LONDON

Ansel Krut's first solo outing at Modern Art, London, is his most mature body of paintings to date. To see this, you have to look beyond the frequent puerile motifs of bums, phalluses and bodily orifices. Born in 1959 in Cape Town and currently living and working in London, Krut is a leading practitioner of what might be termed "cartoon noir," a genre that includes New York-based *grande dame* Joyce Pensato (whose penchant is for Felix the Cat), Armenian-born, London-based Armen Eloyan (who digs Mickey Mouse and Pinocchio), and of course, the late-great Philip Guston. Krut's work is at the more refined end of this ambit, being modest in scale and relatively discrete in painterly style. His canvases are executed in delicately muddled oils whose painterly motifs reference Cubism and Futurism. When the jokes wear thin, this canniness shines.

Like an updated Archimboldo, Krut transmogrifies vegetables, domestic objects and furnishings into uncanny figures inhabiting a dreamy cartoon version of a vanished European salon culture. Frequently, his characters sport antiquated waxed moustaches, porkpie hats and curved tobacco pipes. *Giants of Modernism #2 (Carrot Head)* (all works 2009), for instance, is an intellectual-looking chap made of carrots, one of which thrusts forward like a cigar, its green shoots puffing out like a billow of smoke, and a pair of pince-nez spectacles for eyes.

Above all, these paintings emit energy: they explode outwards with a centrifugal force and draw invisible lines between seemingly random subject matter. A series of works with the word "vortex" in the title are composed of little more than a tornado of swirling lines. *Escalators* is an image of three staircases that defy the logic of gravity. Apart from the possible references to Duchamp's *Nude Descending A Staircase No 2* (1912), M.C. Escher, or anything else your art-historical knowledge might muster, these stairs really look like a triumvirate of closed fans. *Exotic Dancer* picks up this theme with a spread of four open fans that teasingly preserve the modesty of the titular figure, which is actually a bonkers-looking piece of furniture with four Cubist legs and a large toothy rictus smile. *Origami Aviator* translates the fan-form into a corrugated carnation-shape; one of its leaves has turned into a pipe out of which flows a cheery plume of grey smoke.

For all this riot of color and form, Krut seems to be mellowing into middle age. This is most evident in *Tulip & Lily*, a floral display that fills the canvas like an art-nouveau stained glass. It's elegant, if a little too deliberately tasteful. Luckily, the cartoon-noir humor is never far from the surface—it's there in the electric coloration and the triffid-like graphic energy. These stylistic continuities are a bridge between jocular anthropomorphism and quiet objecthood. It's a quiet victory for Krut.

WORK BY ANSEL KRUT IN ON VIEW THROU FEBRUARY 13. MODERN ART IS LOCATED AT 23/25 EASTCASTLE STEET, LONDON.