

ARTNEWS

ARTISTS

'IT HAS TO BE TRAGIC OR SOMEWHAT MANIC-DEPRESSIVE': A TALK WITH SAM MCKINNISS

BY *Bill Powers* POSTED 10/13/16 11:37 AM



Sam McKinniss.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Bill Powers: Artist Alex Da Corte said I should ask you, what is your favorite Angela Lansbury film?

Sam McKinniss: That's a toss up between *Beauty and the Beast* and *Death on the Nile*, the Agatha Christie movie.

BP: Didn't Alex and the artist Borna Sammak chip in on a joint birthday present for you this year?

SM: Yeah, they got me tap shoes. I wore them at the bar all night at my birthday party and then walked home in them, which was fun—tapping down Bedford Avenue. Sometimes I wear them around the studio, which fills me with great joy.

BP: With that gift, were your friends suggesting that for Sam McKinniss all the world is, indeed, a stage?

SM: It's funny to walk in a really loud way. It's obnoxious in a way that I like very much.

BP: I've heard it said that to understand most comedy is to feign ignorance, meaning, we laugh at a knock-knock joke because we know the right answer, but we also understand the miscommunication inherent in the punchline. Does that resonate on any level in your paintings?

SM: In a way, sure.

BP: For instance, in your painting of Johnny Depp holding a puppy.

SM: That's Johnny in some kind of promotional image from the 1990s, although I have no idea what for. I made that painting last year, before the whole Australian fiasco and his subsequent break-up with Amber Heard. In light of that, I guess there's something absurd about it. The tenderness is funny. Anyway, I think humor is a good way to earn the viewer's trust, and trust ought to be the foundation for any good relationship.



Sam McKinniss, *Lil' Kim (with Diana Ross)*, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas.

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BP: Is your C-3PO portrait meant to be a joke painting?

SM: I like that he's this ridiculous and beautiful golden god in a '70s New Age fantasy sci-fi epic. At the same time, he's doing comic relief in an otherwise very archetypal "hero's journey"-style narrative. C-3PO and R2-D2 are also very gay characters. They're, like, in a relationship.

BP: You imagine R2-D2 and C-3PO as a gay couple?

SM: Of course. Everybody does. The same as Bert and Ernie on Sesame Street.

BP: You started your new Prince portrait the day after he died, which reminded me of Warhol beginning his Marilyn paintings the same day her body was found. Are both instances of bad taste? Too soon on the heels of the subject's death?

SM: I don't know if taste is the issue. You might say it's opportunistic and I wouldn't necessarily disagree with that argument. His sudden death definitely felt like a cultural moment though, the massive outpouring of grief and sadness on an international scale. It was very real.

BP: Except for most people—let's be honest—their relationship with Prince hasn't fundamentally changed. You still have his music, which is all you really had in the first place.

SM: But death puts a cap on his creative potential, which seemed practically infinite while he was alive. There's a sense of finitude now. I felt the same way when Whitney Houston died. When Whitney Houston died it felt like a rare species of songbird went extinct. It made me very sad.

BP: You made a new portrait of Obama that echoes Manet's *Boy Blowing Soap Bubbles* (1869). Was that echo intentional?

SM: There's a painting of a boy blowing a bubble by Chardin, too, at the Met, that I like even more than the Manet you're referring to. The Chardin crossed my mind while I was painting this Obama. I just thought Obama looked cute and charming here, slightly ridiculous, even if he wields tremendous power affecting billions of people's lives.

BP: Your selection of subject matter overlaps somehow with Elizabeth Peyton's assertion that she paints people she admires or has affection for. And that her feelings toward them levels the playing field, be it a president or her next door neighbor.

SM: I learned that idea from Elizabeth Peyton. Her impact has been real, and not just for me, but for anyone who went to art school in the 2000s, if you wanted to make figurative paintings. I'm not so motivated by love and affection for subjects, however, as much as I might like human perversity, elegance, and drama.

BP: How do you justify having a portrait of Lil' Kim across from a swan painting in the same exhibition? What's the connective tissue?

SM: Swans are celebrities. When you see a picture of a swan, you instantly recognize that it's a swan. For whatever reason, people identify with them for their familiarity, for their vaguely regal nobility or poise, the romance that a swan picture typically signifies. I'm excited to have that cliché and that I get to work with it. Like, when you see a picture of swans facing one another and their necks form the shape of a heart, that's, like, the best thing of all time.

BP: Another factor that unites many of these new portraits is an element of downfall.

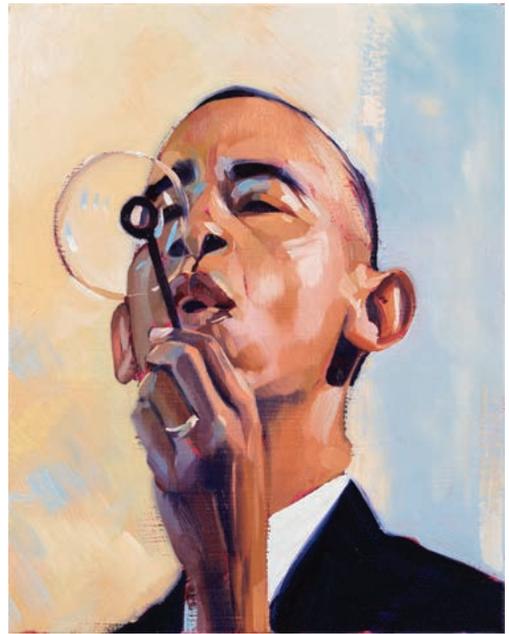
SM: It has to be tragic or somewhat manic-depressive. I like when a picture pushes the libido button or the empathy button, the romance button or the death drive button. And if a picture can hit all those buttons at once, even better.

BP: The title of your new show at Team gallery is "Egyptian Violet."

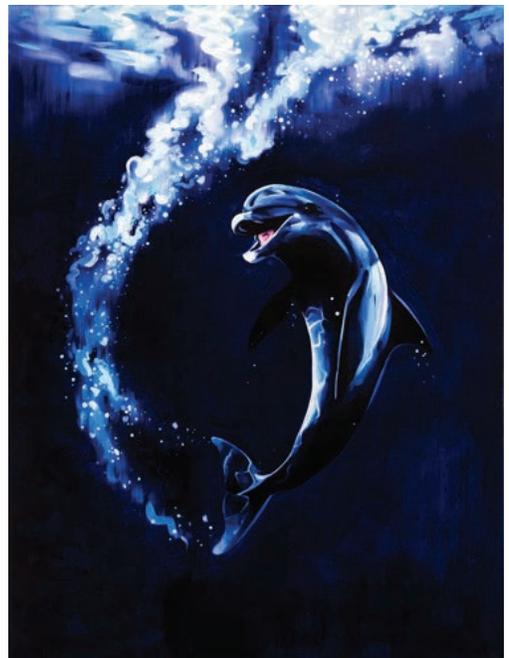
SM: Egyptian Violet is the name of a paint color that I use all the time. I'm somewhat obsessed by it.

BP: Do you think of your Flipper painting as appropriation art?

SM: There's an element of that, yes. I would call the Flipper painting a remake of a remake. Even if I know that Flipper started as a TV show in the 1960s, I only remember the movie with Paul Hogan and Elijah Wood from 1996 when I was a kid. I made the painting by looking at a Flipper movie poster. But I don't care about the movie. I thought the image was beautiful for color and compositional reasons, the richness of material required to render something like this in oil paint, not to mention the facial expression and slender elegance of Flipper. He has real human appeal. I mean, it's a very attractive animal. It's anatomically impossible for a dolphin to frown, which I find interesting. If we're talking about appropriation art, I prefer using the word cliché, a French word



Sam McKinniss, *Obama (Bubble)*, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas.
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Sam McKinniss, *Flipper*, 2016, oil, acrylic and aqua-leaf on canvas.
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that originates from some kind of outmoded printing technique, an early mechanical copying process. I relate to that. I also like pastiche, from the Italian pasticcio, as in pie-crust mix.

BP: Do you ever get nervous that the paintings are too kitschy?

SM: No, I don't worry about that.

"Egyptian Violet" runs from October 13 through November 13, 2016. Team Gallery is located at 83 Grand Street in New York.