

PURPLE REIGN

Steeped in the most florid of colors, Sam McKinniss' new paintings make no apology for their dramatic expression.

BY OSMAN YEREBAKAN



McKinniss' *Obama (Bubble)*, 2016

PHOTO BY JOERG LOHSE

New York-based artist **Sam McKinniss** opened his solo exhibition “Egyptian Violet” at Team Gallery this fall, following last summer’s “Dear Metal Thing” at the gallery’s Los Angeles outpost. Composed of variously sized oil and acrylic densely colored, ethereal paintings of culturally emblematic representations, the exhibition is McKinniss’ assumption of the immense flux of images occupying our collective consciousness through different channels, among which the Internet is the main standout. “I woke up one day and realized something very obvious: There have never been as many pictures in the world as there are right now,” says the artist, referring to his transition from painting the photographs he took of his friends at the early stage of his career to his current endeavor of painting imagery accessible to the masses through media.

Winona Ryder in *Beetlejuice*, Prince on his *Purple Rain* album cover, or a default desktop image of a graceful swan seem equally familiar, yet mesmerizingly transformed. “I felt like I was living in an ad campaign or a music video every day and I couldn’t escape it,” remembers the artist of his teenage years. “I grew up in a landscape that resembled the campaigns that Bruce Weber used to shoot for Abercrombie & Fitch. Weber’s work for A&F will always make me think of lakes as being extremely erotic,” says the Connecticut-raised artist at his East Williamsburg studio.

While his subject matter spans a broad spectrum, ranging from Barack Obama to C-3PO to 18th-century French paintings, one element remains perpetual for the artist who admits to having “a promiscuous eye” for inspiration. A dense and luscious tone of purple, typically referred to as “Egyptian Violet,” dominates each canvas in variant hues. McKinniss’ fascination with this seductively titled pigment bears enthralling results, in which the hallucinatory aura he orchestrates, when

imbued with the desirous enigma the color purple conveys, echoes scenes from a mysterious film noir. “I’m attracted to people who know they’re in trouble but keep living anyway. There’s a sex-drive/death-drive axis that exists psychologically somewhere in all of this that I’m happily and painfully aware of,” says McKinniss.

While recruiting images online for purple-heavy paintings evokes whimsical undertones, McKinniss’ treatment of his source material evolves organically from not only his fascination with sumptuous aesthetics and lush narratives—notions typically associated with queer discourse—but also from an urge to subvert the ubiquitous. “‘Purple prose’ is sometimes used as a pejorative criticism to describe sentimental, exaggeratedly stylish or melodramatic writing, as if those were bad qualities that people ought to avoid,” says McKinniss, whose paintings, unrestrained by their original contexts, coalesce at a flamboyant realm, glazed by the perilous allure of dense purple.

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