

big issues

by Robert Mahoney



[Ozone Hole](#)
[1998](#)



[Detail of](#)
[Ozone Hole](#)



[Virgin and Volcano](#)
[1998](#)



[The "drain" in](#)
[Virgin and Volcano](#)



[Cosmos](#)
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[The "rotisserie" in](#)
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Inka Essenhigh, "New Paintings," Jan. 7-Feb 13, 1999, at Deitch Projects, 76 Grand Street, New York, N.Y. 10013.

Inka Essenhigh's seven impressive enamel paintings come with several influences, but first let me describe the paintings, as best I can. *Cosmos* represents a strange floating island in a sea of blue enamel. Campers, who seem to have melted into the intricate straps and velcro tugs of their extreme sport gear, cook up *something* on a rotisserie. *End of the World* places similar melted humanoids on "horsoids" racing across a cracked earth. *Large Fire* flares up between two cushion-shapes, the figures positioned below.

Public Spirit appears to represent a sort of war game, its green background a setting for meltmen in fatigues, with nature represented by renderings of corn. *Virgin and Volcano* shows an abstract lava flow with brass-knuckled males catching, in agile looping wires, braided females, the lot of them heading towards a very visible drain at the center bottom of the painting. *Ozone Hole* seems to want to suck the torso-people through the hole, while *Deluge* presents Noah as a white-water craft cruiser in contemporary gear.

Essenhigh's enamel surface and her paintings' large size emit a chill, while her figuration and uncanny narrative props often twist up into question marks. Viewing these paintings, I had the feeling that they were created by an alien intelligence, for some other crowd of spectators, all of whom viewed the world through something that I was most definitely not part of. They seemed, ultimately, to be non-paintings for some future art world, when painting had finally and sufficiently adjusted to its role as but one media among many.

In trying to navigate from now to that future, word of those artists that influenced Essenhigh offer clues. Certainly, Essenhigh's mutated figuration comes directly from Francis Bacon, at least in terms of an art historical precedent. As the recent estate exhibition on view up the street at Shafrazi gallery proved, Bacon was a cold soul. He also was not an abstractionist on the level of abstraction as world, but an existentialist who got to an abstract world state by working through figure and representation. Bacon introduced mundane settings -- one "Pope" appears to be sitting in the shower -- and then, finally, to whoosh it all up into an existential thunderhead, abstracted the visual motifs of the setting -- running water, fluted curtain, shower rings, the very concept of precipitation, pouring and runoff -- into abstract forces. Like a brain getting electroshock, Bacon's physical mutations seem to be side-effects of the precipitation of existential malaise onto the everyday.

Essenhigh's figurations are much smaller, almost incidental, really more like the abstracted figures of Gorky and Kandinsky. Essenhigh's too are made to float in a world of abstraction -- but in this case the sheen of enamel, the clean line of her drawing, promises a smooth, sliding space -- no existentialism allowed. But like Bacon, a powerful abstract impulse -- if not existentialism, what? -- precipitates on the world as is and makes everything drain away. Same dynamic.

And here is where Matthew Barney comes in. Would I be too gauche to say that I preferred Barney before he himself transmuted into Cremaster? I liked his work better when he was the gender-bending jock using extreme gear and odd substances -- Vaseline, especially -- to transform the white cube of the old Barbara Gladstone space into a salon of futuristic art. Barney's work in the very early '90s, when art was absorbing the fallout of the end of the Cold War, brought down walls, and set signifiers sliding and sliding. He touched off an avalanche in the white cube which set the imagination flying, wondering, what will the future of art be?

I think Essenhigh's paintings relate to Barney on an illustrational level -- she too has tried to imagine a world of futile gestures and Sisyphean struggles. Her millennial dramas -- the deluge, the drain in *Volcano*, the *Ozone* hole, all the sucking, all making mankind say uncle -- pick up where Barney left off around 1991-92 (before the crash, before the more conservative regroup, before Chelsea) to re-engage the theme of art in a 21st century where the culture of media as we know it will be totally changed.

It's been a while since I felt such a rush of future shock before a painting. Though I'm not yet sure if Essenhigh engages millenarianism or harks back to the missed opportunities of the early '90s, this is certainly not work by a painter bringing painting back (as hyped in *New York* magazine) -- it's "moot media" work by an artist uncategorically forging ahead with the big issues.

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[The comet in
Cosmos
1998](#)



[Large Fire
1998](#)



[A horselike creature in
End of the World
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[Gis from
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[Francis Bacon
Study after Velazquez II
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[Matthew Barney
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