

# Swirls, Whirls, & Mermaid Girls



## Inka Essenhigh

plays fast and loose with her deconstructed mermaids, superheroines, and suburban shoppers—riffing on Art Nouveau, animated cartoons, and Greek myths

**I**N AN UNFINISHED CANVAS ON THE

wall of Inka Essenhigh's sunny garret studio on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a creature propped on a rock warily eyes the viewer. Her lower half trails off in the curvaceous sweep of a mermaid's tail, while her top half looks like that of a surly old hausfrau with disheveled hair. Modeled with a mastery of figure drawing and a good amount of humor, the image is riveting.

"I especially like drawing her face," says the 34-year-old artist, who has an impish quality in her dark, expressive eyes, somewhat akin to that of her disgruntled-looking lady. "I like the idea that she's half animal—like maybe she just ate a raw fish, but she's got a bra on—that she's kind of grumpy and doesn't have any manners. I wanted something that was half vulnerable and half hostile. I like that kind of language and narrative."

A fantastic weirdness of imagery has been the consistent hallmark of Essenhigh's painting since she made a major splash in the New York art world in the late 1990s. Early on, though, as she was being trumpeted in the press as one of several artists revitalizing painting, her surreal hybrid creatures would hurtle through flat expanses of glossy enamel, like comic-book superheroes or space-age villains. Since shifting to oil paint in 2001, a medium that is harder to control than enamel but that allows for subtler gradations from light to dark, Essenhigh has been able to create more-three-dimensional settings and characters with defined facial features that invite greater contact with the viewer.

"I thought this was quite brave for an artist who had already 'made it' for a very specific look to keep growing and not be afraid that people wouldn't move along with her," comments

**BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**

Bonnie Clearwater, director and chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, about Essenhigh's move to oil painting. "It was at that point that I thought it was time to do a show," continues Clearwater, who organized an exhibition in Miami last winter of the artist's oil paintings and drawings done since 2001. "One of the things I like to see in an artist is that there's enough in them to sustain growth and a career."

"Inka's very honest," Clearwater says. "She doesn't try to come up with a line and promote herself. She doesn't always know why she's doing what she's doing, but that's part of what she enjoys."

Essenhigh considers herself more of a draftsman than a painter. She doesn't make preparatory studies, and in a manner akin to the Surrealists', she engages in a form of automatic drawing with the brush to lead her into the images. "I walk up to the canvas and hope something's going to happen. It's almost minute to minute," she says, adding that she doesn't believe the Surrealists were doing true automatic drawing. "They edited and cheated a lot, and I cheat openly."

That was part of her original attraction to enamel paint, which can be easily sanded down or erased with turpentine. "I

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could make whatever I wanted with the assurance that I could change it a million times," she says. The fluidity and sheen of the enamel appealed to her, too, and the medium lent itself to the animated swoop and arabesque patterning of her drawing style. "But the work began to have the weird result of something being covered up," explains Essenhigh, who started her painting *Pegasus* (2001) in enamel, abruptly switched midway to oils, and never looked back.

"I knew the enamels were an easier version of something," she continues. "I learned tons from using them, and I couldn't have made things funny in oil paint before. Now I just want to make the damn images and move on. It's a process almost like therapy, where you get more comfortable with stuff."

Indeed, there is a clear psychological dialogue taking place in her recent paintings that wasn't there before. In *Straight to Hell* (2003), a grinning fiend buzzing in the air over a lonely stretch of deserted road drives a pitchfork into a barely recognizable shape on the ground that extrudes flailing legs, fabric, and a shoulder bag with keys falling out. "I think of this as a self-portrait perhaps, two halves of one person with one half condemning the other to hell," Essenhigh comments, adding that it began as an abstract doodle at the top of the canvas and soon took on the character of a demon.

She describes how another painting, *Power Party* (2003), began with the idea of people turning their backs on the figure of Christ and the cross. It evolved into a painting more generally about rejection and exclusion, with lurid threesomes clumped together, their bodies masses of exaggerated serpent-like contours, casting wicked, covert glances toward the viewer. At the last minute, Essenhigh decided to set this fin-de-siècle party at the top of a skyscraper, adding windows looking out onto the night skyline of New York and establishing an atmosphere of impending doom.

A post-9/11 sensibility reverberates, too, in *Airport Painting* (2003), which Essenhigh painted with almost no editing. Figures pulling luggage on wheels, wearing suburban-style sports gear, and carrying mammoth soda cups in their bags recede toward the crushing horizon line, where the airport runway meets fluorescent ceiling lights. The couple in the foreground look back over their shoulders at the viewer as if they were being pursued. This is one of what Essenhigh calls her tourist paintings, in which she squeezes vignettes of American life through a surreal prism.

**T**HE ARTIST'S FASCINATION WITH SUBURBAN RITUALS STEMS from her upbringing in Belfonte, Pennsylvania, and then Columbus, Ohio, where her family moved when she was eight. Her father, a professor of mechanical engineering at Ohio State University, is English, and her mother, a systems analyst, is Ukrainian. Essenhigh went to a Ukrainian school and a Ukrainian summer camp. "I was supposed to be Ukrainian, but I wasn't," says the artist, whose first name is short for Ivanka. "My parents were different enough that it drew my attention to the fact that I really was American. In Columbus we lived in one of these very generic concept places that was supposed to be a copy of England. We were on Cheshire Road. It was a living postmodernism."

Essenhigh's mother encouraged her early talent in art with private art lessons and trips to museums. "I made little copies of Michelangelo when I was a kid," Essenhigh says. "I was always going to be an artist. There was no other option." She



Essenhigh's figure in *Mermaid*, 2004, a copper-plate drypoint print, conjoins the mythological and the ordinary.



*Blue Wave*, 2002, blends the cartoon world with Art Nouveau and Japanese art.



In *Optimistic Horse and Rider*, 2002, Essenhig lets her figures morph toward abstraction.



*Pegasus*, 2001, a pivotal painting in which Essenhig shifted from enamels to oil paint.

wanted desperately to go to school in New York but also felt terrified, so she opted for the Columbus College of Art & Design, where she had a very traditional education in figure drawing and painted in a realist style. When she came to New York in 1991 to do graduate work at the School of Visual Arts (SVA), where she met artist Steve Mumford, whom she married last year, Essenhig started making Abstract Expressionist-style paintings. "They were kind of lame, but at least I didn't have to think of what I was going to paint next, which was a huge relief. Subject matter has always been such a crisis," she says.

After graduating from SVA, the artist had a series of day jobs, among them designing fabric for Sears boxer shorts that had simple, repetitive motifs—images like spaceships or aliens—on monochrome backgrounds. "These little cartoon elements started to look more interesting than anything that was going on in the studio," says Essenhig, who then painted several canvases titled "Wallpaper for Boys" and "Wallpaper for Girls," featuring crisp, two-dimensional images of football players, soldiers, or cheerleaders that had been laid down in layers of enamel like Colorforms and repeated in patterns across the oversize canvases.

"My big terror after getting out of school was of being feminine and decorative. I wanted to make important art. I wanted to avoid being kind of trivial, and, of course, once you set something like that up," Essenhig points out, "you've got a problem. When I started making the wallpaper paintings, I just knew it was right. They had subject matter. They were emotionally light. I got rid of the painterliness all in one day."

From there, she began pushing her imagery toward abstraction, morphing the human forms and the objects around them and getting them to interact. She has continued such visual language ever since. "It's like they are what they're doing," Essenhig says. "I want them to be real enough that you feel a human presence, but animal enough that you're not really concerned about who or what this person is; it's just about the energy. They float in and out of different things."

Such breaking down of the dichotomy between realism and abstraction struck a chord in the art world, which, in the 1990s, had become bent on revisiting painting. Dealers came calling on Essenhig, along with the press and collectors such as Michael Ovitz, Dean Valentine, and the Rubell family. After Essenhig put on her first solo show at La Mama La Galleria in 1997 of wallpaper paintings, New York dealer Ste-

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fan Stux—who had come to do a studio visit with the woman with whom Essenhigh shared her studio—offered Essenhigh a solo show in 1998. That was followed by an invitation from Jeffrey Deitch, whose 1999 Essenhigh show was where Clearwater first saw the artist's work, and then from Mary Boone, who represented her until 2001. "The funny thing is that, on the one hand, I had gotten access to the art world, but on the other hand, I didn't really know anybody," says Essenhigh, who is frank about enjoying the sight of her name in print ("Maybe that's what makes me ultimately suburban") but also feels she suffered from the overexposure.

**I**N 2002 ESSENHIGH BEGAN SHOWING AT 303 GALLERY IN CHELSEA, where her paintings sell for between \$35,000 and \$55,000. She has been exhibiting at London's Victoria Miro Gallery since 1999. She routinely gets together with artist friends, sharing a model and practicing life drawing. Recently, she has been concentrating on faces, learning, she says, from the economical expressions of Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec. She also cites the influence of Leonardo, Pollock, and Guston. Grabbing a dog-eared copy of H. W. Janson's *History of Art*, she opens it to a 13th-century Romanesque landscape with stylized vegetation. "I love the kind of Romanesque forms in this little picture. There is this sort of wacky life, with things flowing and moving around," explains Essenhigh, who says her only distraction when she's not working in the studio is going to museums. "It's kind of depressing that I'm not interested in anything else," she says.

Clearwater, who was originally a medievalist, saw an immediate connection between Essenhigh's work and the Romanesque and was intrigued with the way the artist's curvilinear designs respond to the English Arts and Crafts Movement, Persian miniatures, and Japanese art. "Inka's work draws from all these different sources and synthesizes them in a way that is hers uniquely," says Clearwater. "One day I was flipping through Janson's *History of Art* and almost every other page I thought, Wow, that has an element in Inka's work, without anything being obvious."

"I think my greatest strength as an artist is that I have a style of drawing that's very much my own," says Essenhigh, who will have a painting in SITE Santa Fe in July and will participate in the exhibition "Image Smugglers" at the São Paulo Biennial, which opens September 25. "But whenever I drew faces in the enamel, they never seemed to resolve into something that was emotionally right for me, or the stylization made it all too clear as to how much Michelangelo, how much Leonardo, how much comic book I was using." Having eliminated faces altogether until she took up oils, she now says, "Basically, all I want to do as a painter is make people and things living. I don't really want to make cutting-edge work, and I don't want to make art about art. I might be a traditionalist." ■

**TOP** *Airport Painting*, 2003, is one of what Essenhigh calls her tourist paintings; she squeezes vignettes of American life through a surreal prism.

**CENTER** *Beauty Contest*, 1999, concentrates on breaking down the realism-abstract dichotomy.

**BOTTOM** *Wallpaper for Boys*, 1996. Essenhigh knew her wallpaper paintings were right. "They had subject matter. They were emotionally light," she says, "and they weren't painterly."

