

Richard Hull's Abstract Heads

by John Yau



Richard Hull's studio is in a storefront in the East Village section of Chicago. He paints in the front room, which was where the store used to be, and he and his wife live in the back, as did the grocer who once owned this store. Although Richard's work has undergone a number of changes since I first met him in 1981, at the opening of his second exhibition at Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York, there is one constant running throughout, which is his medium: he paints with a mixture of oil and wax. The result is a matte, warm, fleshy surface, which feels perfect for his subjects: abstract heads.

Hull's medium seems to me to be a natural extension of his devotion to Crayolas, which he first used as a kid growing up in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. When I visited him in his studio, and was looking at his drawings, he told me that he began using them again when he moved to Chicago to get his MFA at SAIC, and has never tired of them. It's not hard to see why. With Crayolas, he can draw in color, moving decisively across the paper's surface, making looping and petal-like forms and marking them small shapes.

Originally there were eight colors in a box of Crayola Crayons. Now you can pick from such colors as "Alien Armpit," "Atomic Tangerine," "Neon Carrot," "Blizzard Blue," "Purple Mountains' Majesty," and "Razzle Dazzle Rose." It seems to me that these and other names might even help conjure some of the forms that we see in Hull's drawings and paintings, their seductive otherness. And the more wacky names that I came across, while researching Crayola's colors, the more I became convinced that Hull has probably used them all as well as memorized their offbeat monickers.

In his drawings, he layers one color over another, and then scratches back into the surface. In some cases, the scratches may remind you of scarification and other ways of ornamenting the body. He will use many shades of a single hue, and then find ways to interrupt our expectations with flashes of strong, contrasting and complementary colors. The scratched surface, with other colors peeking through, requires you to refocus, begin noticing all the different tones, shifts, and surprises Hull has orchestrated in one composition. I have the feeling that Hull will use whatever color is available, that he has no set palette, no identifiable preferences.

The looping forms and petal-like shapes are activated by concentric lines and dashes. The overlapping, profusion of shapes often appear to be cell-like, complete with a nucleus. The cells can look like eyes, all of which seem to be staring at you blankly. I am reminded of the eyes peering from the angels's wings in the Apse of Santa Maria, which is on exhibition at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain.

Other times the petals resemble the tongues of panting dogs, whirlpools of paint, a multitude of large ears, the leather plates and scales of samurai armor, or parts of unidentifiable and possibly dangerous plants. And still at other times, the shapes resemble cartoon splatters or explosions. To reinforce the feeling that they are heads – at once inviting and indecipherable – Hull places his dense bouquets of colored shapes on top of what we perceive as a neck and shoulders (or is it the top of a jug?) rising up from the work's bottom edge.

I mention these different, conflicting associations because Hull's "stolen portraits" stir up a wild swirl of associations that we might recognize as sacred or profane, exalted or base, without aligning itself with either these categories. The heads seem to be pushing simultaneously towards figuration and abstraction. They come across as animated, as if in the middle of a rant, spiel, or particularly odd thought.

With their myriad forms spilling forth in all directions, Hull's abstract heads seem to know that they possess more than they can handle. There are visual rhymes between noses and phalluses, flower petals, tongues, and the fleshy outer lips of the labia majora, all of which are further enhanced by his use of a matte, waxy medium.

Hull's concatenations of concentric, looping forms don't define an overall shape so much as register a controlled whirlwinds of paint and crayon. In his inventiveness, he seems to have drawn inspiration from divergent strains of representation – including the gestural abstract loops of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, the backs of heads painted on African barber shop signs, the abstract heads that Barbara Rossi painted on Plexiglas, and the melting, dripping heads of Peter Saul, all of which are anchored by Pablo Picasso's *Woman in a Straw Hat* (1937). It is a challenging set of precedents that Hull – who, for years, has looked closely at works from all periods and cultures in The Art Institute of Chicago – has absorbed as well as transformed into something recognizably his own.

When I try to think of a short list of descriptors that can be applied to Hull's work, this is the list I came up with: funny, weird, seductive, robust, mysterious, saucy, endearing, and menacing. And yes, what strikes me most of all the work's effortless ability to define a realm in which the familiar becomes unfamiliar, and even strange, but more than that, how aloof and other they remain. It is as if they don't know or even care that we are staring at them. Some people want to know that they are being seen: they are often posting images of themselves on social media.

Hull's heads occupy a different domain. They are utterly without vanity and completely absorbing. They do not look at themselves or at you. That level of self-contained confidence is all too rare these days. Hull's abstract portraits remind us that an irreducible radiant presence can still be attained, if only you knew how.

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