

HYPERALLERGIC

Richard Hull Completes the Picture

Once known for his abstracted portraits, the Chicago artist is now exploring new directions.

By John Yau, March 22, 2023

CHICAGO — I first saw Richard Hull's work in 1981 when he had his second New York show at the Phyllis Kind Gallery. We lost touch around the time Phyllis closed her gallery in 2009, and did not see each other again until 2016, when I wrote about visiting his studio in Chicago, where he has lived since the late 1970s. On my recent trip to Chicago, I did not think I would be able to see, much less write about, his current exhibition, [*Richard Hull: Mirror and Bone*](#), at Western Exhibitions, running through April 22. I had not considered writing about Hull's work because we were about to collaborate on monotypes at Manneken Press in Bloomington, Illinois — something we had never done before.

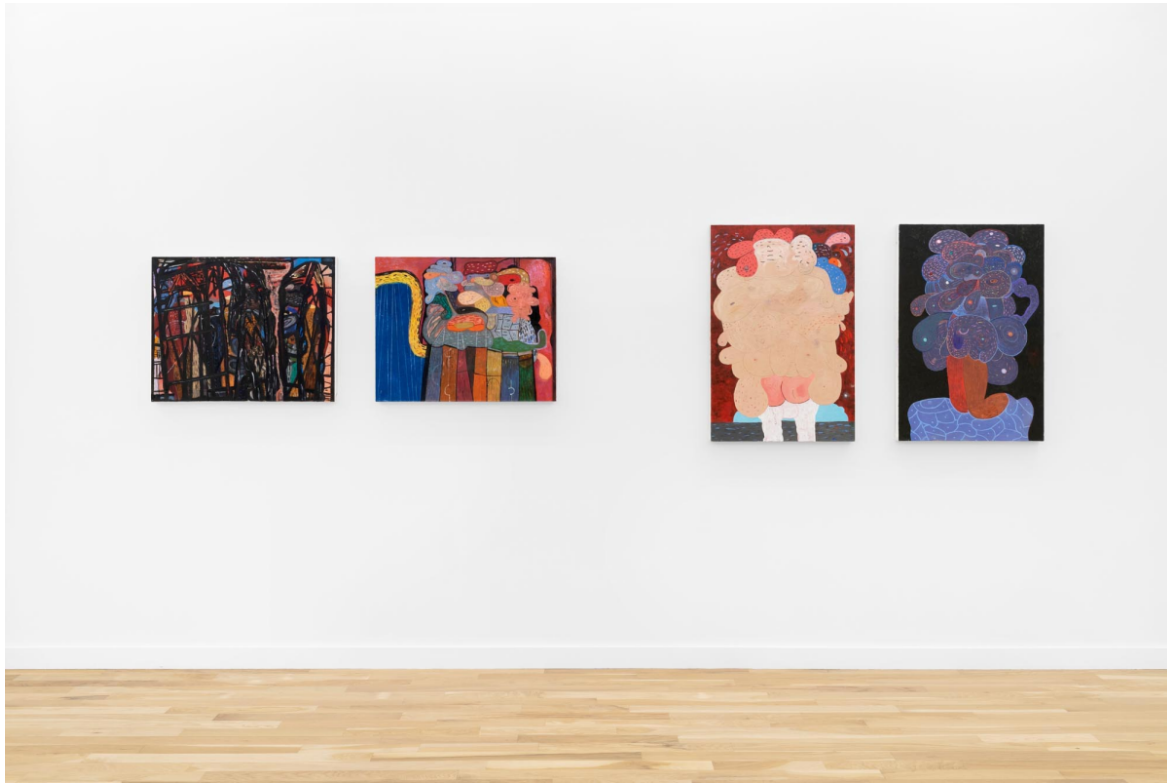
Three surprises in the exhibition indicate that Hull is committed to pushing into new territory. In each of the gallery's three discrete areas, Hull presented something different from what you might expect if you have followed his work. The artist is known for his paintings of abstract heads, or what he calls "stolen portraits," which seem to be simultaneously erupting and blossoming. Here, he included three horizontal paintings with his "portraits" and "figures" in the first gallery space: "Cabins," "Departure," and "Exiles" (all 2023). By moving away from the vertical format he has long adhered to for his abstract heads, Hull challenged himself to consider a different kind of pictorial space.

The three paintings have little in common, which suggests that Hull has neither found a solution to working with a different pictorial space or, more importantly, settled on one. In "Cabins," he overlays vertical forms populating an abstract landscape with thick, black, irregular lattice. On the painting's right side, the thick black line encloses a series of forms, contouring a new shape. In the middle, the lines and forms come closer to merging, while on the left side the lattice resembles a ladder. The changes in the interrelationship of the black line and ground prevent a uniform reading of the surface; the figure-ground relationship is one of the issues Hull explores in the three horizontal paintings.

Does Hull's "Departure" allude to Max Beckmann's great, mysterious diptych "Departure" (1932–35)? We seem to be inside a walled space with a large arched window. A group of figures seemingly wearing caps are on the right side of the painting, facing left. On the left is another group of what appears to be three figures. Who is departing and to where are they departing? Are the figures animal or humans or — more likely — a combination of both? In "Departure," the black arch visible in the painting's background defines the surroundings as a room-like space and frames a blue field that reads as water or sky.



Richard Hull, *Departure*, 2023. Oil and wax ground on linen, 48h x 60w in.



Installation view of Richard Hull: Mirror and Bone at Western Exhibitions.
Left to right: "Cabins" (2023), "Exiles" (2023), "Nude" (2021), and "The Sleep" (2022).

The ambiguous red ground in "Exiles" seems to shift from a wall on the painting's left side to a window or door, or possibly even a mirror, on the far right. Is the curving yellow band extending in from the painting's upper left edge strands of hair or a path? Although we see the forms we cannot exactly identify them. In contrast to his heads, I think Hull wants to bring the viewer closer to the realm of names without crossing over into discursiveness.

In the space connecting the first and second gallery are "Teller" and "Crossing" (both 2023), two horizontal drawings done in colored pencil, charcoal, and crayon. The largely white figure in "Teller" on the left seems to be at once inside and outside of the room, as it passes from one space to another, demarcated by the gray rectangular frame occupying much of the drawing's upper half.

All of these changes and explorations did not prepare me for what was in the second gallery, which was full of mostly large pink paintings. It feels as if once Hull began using pink he could not stop himself from letting it take over and seeing how much pink he could put in a painting. This room makes a wonderful addition to his oeuvre. While all the paintings share the subject of abstract portraiture, he does not repeat himself. In "Breath" (2021), made during the height of the pandemic, spotted tongue-like shapes seem to be both fighting and attempting to get away from each other. There is something weirdly funny, slightly disturbing, oddly comical, and a tad creepy about this work. The other pink paintings move in different directions.

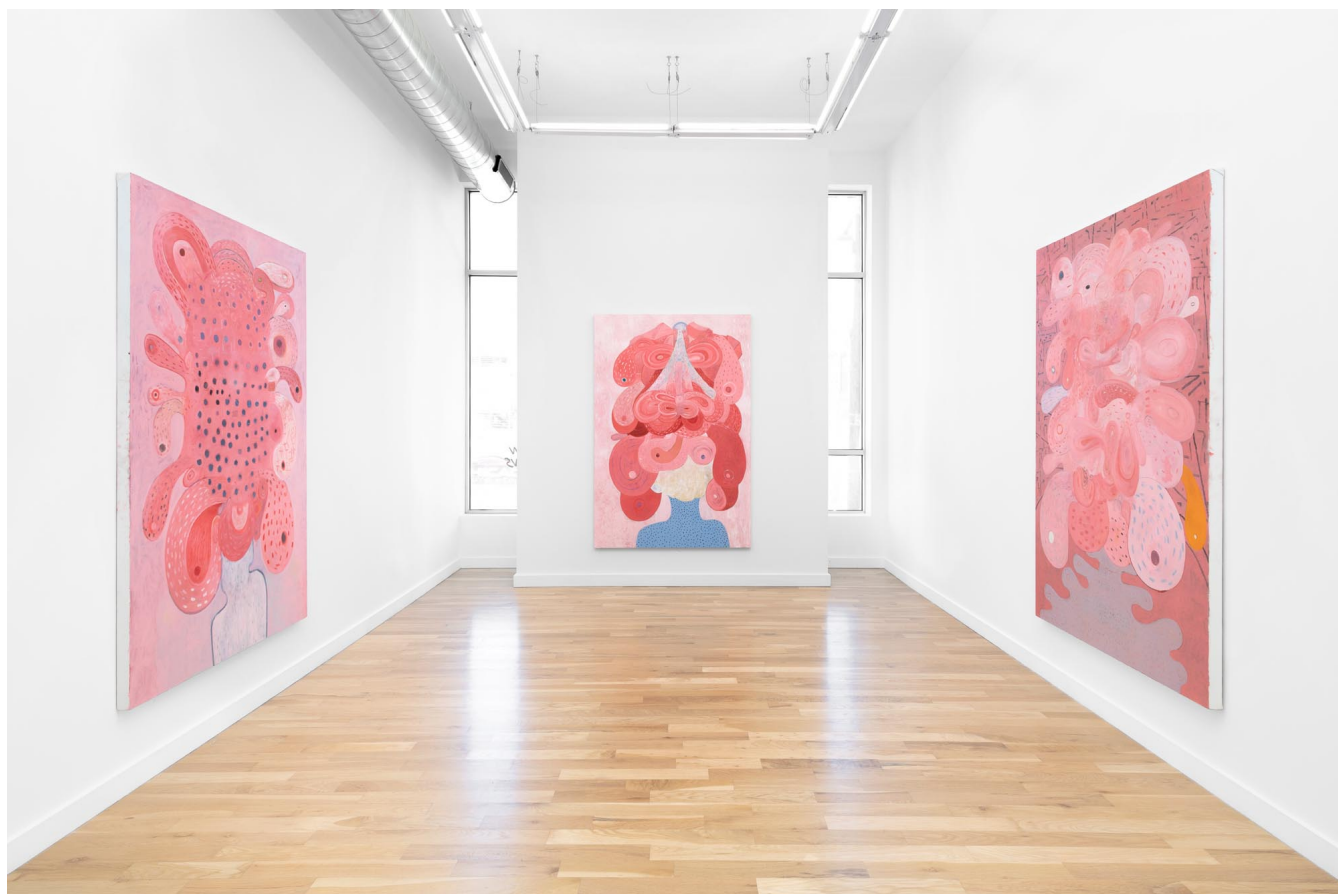
The contours in the smaller painting, "Verge" (2023), harken back to Arcimboldo and Bellini, Renaissance painters known for portrait heads. That we cannot tell whether the shape is meant to be read as hair or flesh is part of its meaning. Hull's refusal to become explicitly referential and figurative differentiates his heads from those of artists like Jim Nutt and Peter Saul. The singularity of his work, and his own restless desire for change, speak well for his future. What strikes me about this exhibition are the different paths Hull chose to explore, and the confidence he has in presenting them to the public.



Richard Hull, *Verge*, 2023.
Oil and wax ground on linen, 30h x 24w in.



Richard Hull, *Teller*, 2023.
Coloured pencil, charcoal, and crayon on paper, 30h x 38w in.



Installation view, Richard Hull: *Mirror and Bone*, at Western Exhibitions, Chicago.