

NEWCITYART

Full-Body Sensation: A Review of Richard Hull at Western Exhibitions

By Alan Pocaro

March 14, 2023



Crossing the threshold into the second-story home of Western Exhibitions, you'll immediately notice a few things. The first—of course—are the paintings. Neatly arranged, they're a colorful and curious rogue's gallery of surreal portraits lining starch-white walls. Benzol greens and sour yellows flutter, pop and sizzle under clean, fluorescent light.

The second thing you'll notice is the smell. Warm and woody with buttery overtones, it's the scent of linseed oil and wax perfuming the gallery air with the unmistakable fragrance of the painter's studio. Smartphones be damned, this is the kind of immersive full-body sensation that you can only get by being there. We are now firmly in Richard Hull's world.

Hull, who attended grad school at the School of the Art Institute and also teaches there, arrived by way of Kansas City in the late seventies. While still a student he began showing his gorgeous, tightly composed abstract interiors with Phyllis Kind, whose stable of artists included many of the Chicago Imagists. But it was an oversized game of exquisite corpse and an encounter with the Klein bottle that brought Hull to the works he's been refining for the past fifteen years.

In "Mirror and Bone" we witness the growth and transformation of his signature bulbous figures from portraits of an interior world into fleshed-out personages that stand on their own. No longer just outlandish hairstyles combed into curvilinear shapes, the figures in "Nude" and "The Sleep" have sprouted legs and stand, kneel, sweat and bleed, everything brought to life by a lushness of touch that's equally glossy and matte.

While the works we've come to expect from Hull are still very much present, "The Fool" and "Hill" being outstanding examples, in some cases they're bigger and meaner. The fleshy, Philip Guston-inspired pinks that dominate the figures in Gallery Two even possess sinister undertones. The ham-hock wig of "Cataract" is particularly disturbing, and yet somehow funny at the same time.

Art offers us glimpses into alternate realities where the rules of our world don't apply and yet we believe in the veracity of the artist's claim none the less. Hull is master of this practice. And the works in "Mirror and Bone" are an object lesson in this peculiar quality of superior painting.

Since my first review for Newcity appeared in print some ten years ago, I cannot remember an exhibition season that was absent Hull's chromatic and quixotically formed figures. After almost two decades of teaching at SAIC, his influence, both subtle and unconcealed, is now extensive. Given the scale, scope and impact of this dedicated painter's accomplishments, a museum-scale, career-spanning retrospective seems overdue. (Alan Pocaro)

Richard Hull "Mirror and Bone" is on view through April 22 at Western Exhibitions, 1709 West Chicago.

WESTERN EXHIBITIONS

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