

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Richard Baker Kicks Out the Jams

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For the past decade, Richard Baker has developed two distinct but related bodies of work, one in oil and the other in gouache: the oil paintings depict tabletops covered with all sorts of printed ephemera and bric-a-brac; the gouaches are of book covers and, more recently, record covers. In 2012, however, Baker began breaking down the neat division between the oil paintings and works on paper by making something silly — a Whoopee cushion — out of paper and painting it pink.

At the same time, while a poetry book cover and a novelty store standby might not seem to have that much in common, it seems to me that they are or were a part of the artist's life, and that he is unembarrassed about these details. In fact, in his current exhibition, *Holiday*, at Tibor de Nagy (January 11–February 22), he has become more blatant about both his aesthetic position and his range of personal affections, which I see as a breakthrough. What enabled him to raise the stakes, as well as dissolve the barrier between the two separate bodies of work, was his willingness to indulge in foolishness and humor — traits we associate with poets of the New York School.

The exhibition's title, *Holiday*, is a reference to the great comedic film *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* (1953), which Jacques Tati directed as well starred in, playing the unflappable Hulot. Baker has done a large painting of the cover of the important French film magazine, *Cahiers du Cinema*, which features Tati on the cover. In contrast to the gouaches and his earlier oil paintings, where there was a close relationship between the size of the actual object and that of the image, Baker's version of *Cahiers du Cinema* proportionally enlarges the cover by a considerable amount; something the artist has never done before. As in earlier work, he depicts the magazine's worn edges, underscoring that the source is a real object.

There are also paintings of Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* (1964) and Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* (1966). Baker's version of O'Hara's book comes in four sizes, ranging from oversized to actual dimensions. In the two smaller ones, the artist depicted only the blue rectangle on a red background, evoking Ellsworth Kelly's geometric paintings, the history of postwar book design, and the no-nonsense look and diminutive size of City Lights Pocket Poets Series. The play between printed word and abstraction is just one of the issues Baker wrestles with in this new body of work.

Baker installed this and other paintings salon-style in the back room of the gallery. In the middle of the room he placed a vitrine containing plaster and paper sculptures of a chocolate donut, a box of Chuckles, loose chocolates, toasted marshmallows on sticks, Graham crackers, a passport, a half-filled, take-out coffee cup, a paddle ball racquet, vinyl records and other stuff. It is as if the things in his paintings escaped into the three-dimensional world. His attention to surface and shape transforms them into talismanic objects and endows them with a sense of urgency. At the same time, Baker doesn't try to achieve perfection, as is evident in the painted plaster LP's and 45's and even the coffee cup.

One of the themes of *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* is Hulot's inability to fit into a world committed to time saving, technological gadgets, resulting in wonderful sight gags and minor domestic disasters. In this, I see Baker making a comparison between the uncouth Hulot and the artist devoted to the handmade, not as a craft, but as a form of delight and even conscious idiocy. He isn't trying to prove that he can fool viewers into thinking that his objects are "real"; he is instead reminding them of the joys that might be found in toasted marshmallows and s'mores.

The other theme suggested by the paintings proceeds from Baker's versions of Susan Sontag's best-known book, *Against Interpretation* (1966). In the book's title essay, Sontag concludes with: "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." One taboo Baker seems to be breaking is seriousness. A whoopee cushion – also known as a farting bag or Razzberry Cushion – is an apparatus that simulates the sound of human flatulence, with the purpose of humiliating the unsuspecting victim. Hardly a fitting subject for serious art.

In caring for such crude things with apparently no other purpose than to celebrate their existence, Baker thumbs his nose at the discourses shaping the art world. Instead of submitting and accommodating his work to the hermeneutic codes that have long been in vogue – which these days seems more academic than radical – he advances humor as a possibility, not the snarky snideness of a Richard Prince, but something marked by madness and frivolity.

It seems to me that by bringing a harmless vulgar object into play, Baker is critiquing those who reject the handmade in favor of conceptual art and outsourcing. He recognizes that dismissive terms such as commodification and branding are applied to object makers, as if somehow they are all the same, which they are not, rather than to conceptual artists. More importantly, Baker calls attention to human imperfection and frowned-upon bodily functions, which might also be considered forms of institutional critique. Think of Whoopee Cushions in a museum context and you get my drift. Finally, Baker's exhibition is both an installation and an archive, and, in that regard, up-to-date in its presentation. It is seemingly off-handed until you look more closely and begin seeing the puns and riffs. As Monsieur Hulot, Tati was a trickster who caused havoc wherever he went. One senses that Tati the film director was motivated in part by his love of human foibles. A similar impetus seems to drive Baker.