

HYPERRALLERGIC

October 20, 2017

How an Artist's Activism Nurtured His Painting

This exhibition is a ten-year survey concentrating on Peter Krashes's paintings that emerged in an almost symbiotic relationship with his political involvement as a community organizer.

Patrick Neal



Peter Krashes, "Empty Mics" (2008) oil on linen, 63 x 84 inches (courtesy of the James Gallery, CUNY)

Peter Krashes's paintings have often drawn on distinctly personal material: flight patterns circling his parent's house, intimate portraits of his husband (the artist Oliver Herring) or Krashes's own body undergoing physical therapy. In past bodies of work, he has utilized devices such as a distorting mirror, a camera obscura, panoramic lenses, shutter speeds, and strobes to create perceptual experiences that parallel the psychological disturbances, bafflement and ambiguities of his subjects. These devices have also inspired a variety of ways to apply paint to canvas: fast, slippery swooshes, choppy prismatic distortions, or spinning centrifugal wheels all figure into Krashes's markmaking strategies. And, by incorporating these varied techniques, Krashes reinvigorates what have been his essential terrain: portrait, still life, and landscape genres.



Peter Krashes, "Officer on the Red Carpet" (2014) gouache on paper, 18 x 24 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

In his current exhibition at the James Gallery at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, Krashes has inverted his artistic practice, to look outward rather than inward. Around a decade ago, at the onset of the controversial Atlantic Yards/Pacific Park development project in Brooklyn,

he became a community organizer in response to his studio, home and neighborhood being disrupted. This show is a ten-year survey concentrating on Krashes's paintings that emerged in an almost symbiotic relationship to his political involvement. The show's catalog details his day-to-day participation: planning and attending meetings, tussling with politicians and police, protesting, and bonding with neighbors and colleagues. The gallery pulses with colorful anecdotal details and inventive brushwork as Krashes allows you to study his hand and mind at work on the different platforms of activism and the creation of the painted image. The walls of the exhibition are encircled with diaristic paintings of macro and microscopic views of his experiences.



Peter Krashes, "Cameras Always Find the Elected Official" (2010), oil on linen, 63 x 84 inches (courtesy of the James Gallery, CUNY)

In large, panoramic images of courtrooms, peopled by reporters and cameramen, where legislation shaping our lives and futures plays out, Krashes's oil paint often congeals into a hazy glare or a stuffy, clouded morass suggestive of bureaucratic inertia. The works draw attention to the artifice of pomp and ceremony, reminding us that mediated experiences are as much a part of our perceptions as lived, corporeal experience. Pictures of both law and order as staged sets and powerfully real events are delivered like sequences in a Brian De Palma film: through projections, atmospheric fog, film gels, skewed vantage points, and natural and artificial haloed light. Krashes returns again and again to motifs of huddled masses, banks of cameras and microphones, walls of police, face-to-face collusion between the press and politicians, absentee officials, elected authorities, or angelic administrators. Some of the subjects, like the public advocate Letitia James, are revisited in different media, as if being electronically rebroadcast or recalled in dreams.



Peter Krashes, "Egg Painting" (2015) gouache on paper, 65 x 48 inches (courtesy of the James Gallery, CUNY)

On the other end of the spectrum are the regular folks whose lives are upended by gentrification, and here Krashes's paintings of neighbors and community are more celebratory. When he creates pictures of adults and children engaged with arts and craft mediums, designing banners and signage dribbled in tempera, or splashing around face paints and Easter egg dyes, he capitalizes on the chalky, opaque medium of gouache on paper to create a visual analogy. He crops in close on a child's face or letterform, varies his brush size, and thins, sweeps, and overlays the paint so the viewer senses the intimacy of the act. Larger images of block parties with kids at play, are tilted, asymmetric compositions that blur the line between representation and abstraction. As figurative works, these share an affinity with action paintings — dynamic human presence materializes through centralized colors, patterns, and movement, a manifestation of the figures' efforts and imagination.



Peter Krashes, “Block Party (Face Painting)” (2012-ongoing), gouache on paper, each 10 1/4 x 7 3/4 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



“Unintentional Community: From Shared Experience to Action”, a conversation between artist Peter Krashes, (left) urban planner Jaime Stein (right) and Brooklyn residents concerned about Atlantic Yards, held at the James Gallery, CUNY (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Krashes’s work acknowledges our human existence as private beings in need of interaction with one another, and his decision to step outside himself and become an unpaid community organizer is inspiring. Many contemporary artists have been distracted, questioning the best use of their time in an increasingly corporatized America where the Trump administration daily amps up anxiety levels. The best art often addresses the context in which it is made, and Krashes’s ongoing project as an activist/painter underscores the winning formula of empathy over depersonalization.

Block Party: Peter Krashes continues at The James Gallery, The Graduate Center, CUNY, Manhattan through October 28.