

Art in America

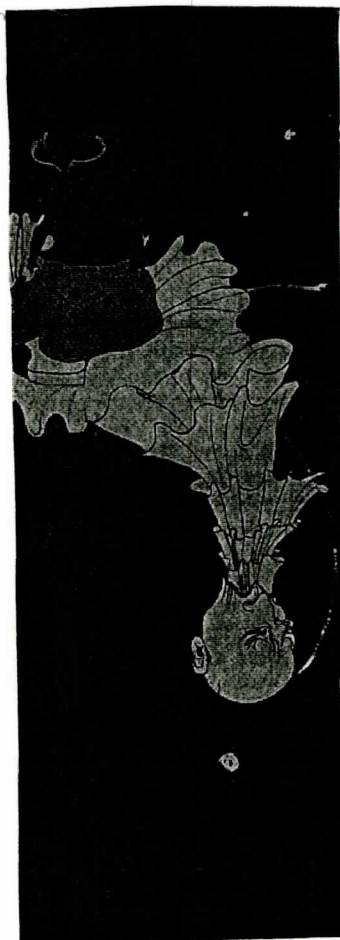
REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Inka Essenhigh at Mary Boone

Inka Essenhigh has created not only her own visual universe but almost her own genre. Her oil-enamel paintings are populated by faceless cyborgs and small humanoid shapes that engage in life-and-death battles, hurtling through desolate colorscapes. The canvases are generally layered so thickly with enamel that they glisten like laquerware; a machine-made, technological feel has seemed part of their point.

Recently, an exhibition of oil-on-paper works, the artist's first drawing show, provided a different slant on Essenhigh's form-bending world, where skillful drafting and a Surrealist sensibility fuse. Nine works, ranging in size from 15 by 19 inches to 41 by 29 inches, all dating from 2000, displayed the artist's characteristic ripe colors and edgy forms. Interestingly, though, this time there was also a strong residue of the mythic, of exotic fairy tales, interwoven with a fluid, nightmarish sense of the body. In one lavender-tinged work, quick brushstrokes sketch out a kneeling, androgynous hero-figure who stares up mischievously at a superhero-genie surging overhead and held by a cord; a bouquet of kidney-shaped eyes springs from the creature's belly. In another painterly piece, a flesh-toned hydra with rib-cage-shaped tentacles morphs into a set of unruly tresses; a faceless, serpentlike female struggles to subdue the mass of hair with a curling iron.

Rich background hues attracted the eye; indeed, with their quasi-supernatural exploits hovering in pictorial space, many works brought to mind Persian miniatures. An irreverent sensibility blends the heroic, monstrous



Inka Essenhigh: *Untitled (Birth of Venus)*, 2000, enamel on paper, 24 by 10 1/4 inches; at Mary Boone.

or exotic with mundane details. Against a bold, persimmon-colored backdrop, a fleshy Buddhist monk sitting on a meditation cushion, his back partially turned to the viewer, applies roll-on underarm deodorant. As always, the works summon to mind disparate associations. Greek myth, 1940s Surrealism and Asian art are all evident in one

symphony of blues in which an upside-down genie's head (obliquely recalling the North Wind figure in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*), puffs billows of atmospheric fabric upward; these transform into a lotus, on top of which kneels a plump, orange figure with breasts and podlike eyepieces, an umbilical cord plugs the creature into the wall.

Unlike her highly finished paintings, these works on paper seemed to stress "process." The works float in discreet white frames to expose torn edges, staple marks and copious layers of underpainting visible around the rim. One felt the artist's hand at work, and in several pieces, sketchy forms seemed to be surfacing or disappearing under layers of paint. Indeed, one sensed that Essenhigh exploits a kind of trial-and-error automatism, her fantastic scenarios springing from suggestions given by the meanderings of a line or a blotch of color. And underneath everything is a proclivity toward epic storytelling—even if one is not always sure exactly what the story is. Essenhigh maps out a wholly original cosmology.

—Carey Lovelace