



"He Didn't Take Seriously the Threat from Below"
Pastel on Sandpaper 58" x 38," 1996

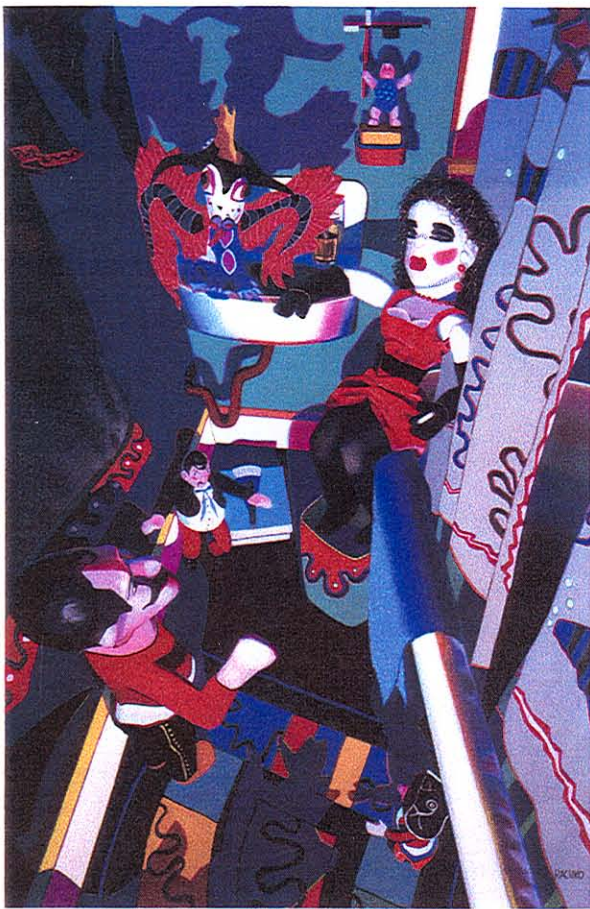


"The Leader Challenged"
Pastel on Sandpaper 58" x 38," 1997

Thinking about Barbara Rachko's work reminds me of a very unexpected distinction Clement Greenberg once made about dominant aesthetic trends in modernist painting. To paraphrase his comments, he said that painters such as Matisse and Picasso pursued a certain style in order to achieve a specific content (aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, philosophical, etc.), whereas painters such as Braque and Gris returned to the same elements of content in order to continually satisfy the demands of a single style. Ms. Rachko's work falls (in this critic's opinion) into the former category, one in which I believe Greenberg meant to suggest a more advanced level of plastic/conceptual virtuosity. This panorama of large-scale works of pastel on sandpaper confronts the viewer with a controlled arsenal of pictorial and content signifiers which is perfect in its consistency and effect. Each "canvas" ushers in another unique cube of Rachko's quietly lurid box-within-a-box world: there is the bizarre, oblique angle of view; the fastidiously arranged concatenation of objects and masks, carved wooden animals, *papier mâché* figures, children's toys; the unsettling, intended tension between the super-purity of animation/comic book solid, undifferentiated color, and the spatial integrity/realism of the scene's verisimilitude (reminiscent to a degree of Lichtenstein's last series of interiors done in colored pencil); the chiaroscuro, sometimes *film noir* effect of quirky shadows spilling onto creamy whites with ominous definition; the sense of dream-like disorientation which lurks just beneath the surface of each picture: there is a kind of surrealism posed by the unlikely relationship between objects and environment yet the impression of being in a real place and time exerts equal strength on the viewer.

Let us first examine Rachko's method. Every piece includes some aspect of her 72-year-old Sears house applied as a background for the interiors (hence the occasional, programmed repetition of certain furnishings and the general familiarity of tableaux, lighting, and atmosphere).

Barbara Rachko



"He Urged Her to Abdicate"
Pastel on Sandpaper 58" x 38," 1997



"He Lost His Chance to Flee"
Pastel on sandpaper 58" x 38," 1995

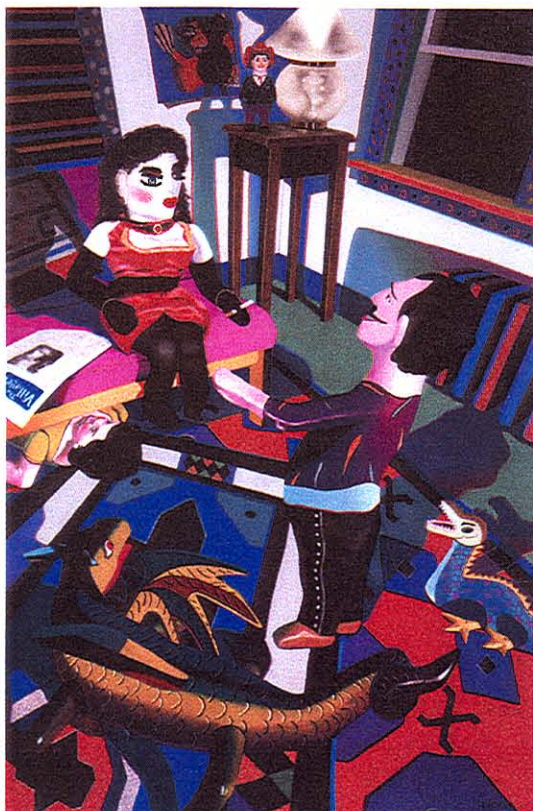
It is important to note, however, that these are not imagined still lifes and interiors: every item and detail exist, they are a permanent part of the physical space that is Rachko's home. Arranging and rearranging the objects at her disposal (allowing subtle evolutions of position and placement to occur over a period of weeks), Rachko then lights the scene with a Hitchcockian, Langesque, or Wellesian sense of shadow and contrast: the kind of light which reminds one of the subterranean psychological domain of films like *Blackmail*, *M*, and *Citizen Kane*. When she is satisfied with the dynamics of the geographical and color interactions, a photograph is made, capturing the scene with a 4"x5" camera. Then the pastel work begins: in no way is it a reproduction or replica of the photographic image; rather a kind of media-guided rebirth and enhancement occurs, a festival of color guided foremost by the anchored, thick "there" of pastel, accompanied by the very original translation of the versatility of the camera's infinitely varied angles of view and perspective into the thousand year old, traditional frontal perspective of the easel painting (a separate study should be made on this single aspect of Rachko's art: no other artist of the twentieth century has addressed this issue with a style commensurate with its demands; Rachko has seamlessly stitched the infinite plausibility of the camera's authorial autonomy onto the "canvas" ...she is peerless in this regard).

One of the most dramatic examples of this aspect of Rachko's style can be found in "He Lost His Chance to Flee." Here we are given an elevated, almost aerial angle of view of assorted toy and other *papier mâché* objects in an otherwise unconventional bathroom still life. Note how the insistence on the oblique in this perspective is so nonchalantly cinematic (there is the allusion to the expressionistic perspective of shots from Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* or early Stanley Kubrick films). Surrounded by the scorpion on the toilet seat, the winged jester, the little jacketed cowboy, the poised lizard, the jutting head of the prehistoric beast peering from the shower curtain, and other little figures, the supine, deliberately "cute," stuffed gorilla has indeed lost his chance for survival and escape.

Barbara Rachko



"Abandoned at Birth, They Grew Up Bent"
Pastel on Sandpaper 58" x 38," 1997



"Sometimes She Still Found Him Charming,"
Pastel on sandpaper 58" x 38, " 1997

This work is representative of much of Rachko's vision in that her portrayal of a kind of "nightmare world" of the inanimate-come-alive conveys (aided by her use of twisted perspective and self-expressive color) a kind of upside-down version of the heroics and positivism of the mythological landscapes found in *March of the Wooden Soldiers* and, more recently, *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* and *Toy Story*. Thematically, Rachko is certainly Swiftian in her capacity for ironic commentary on conventional social values through the use of exaggeration, fantasy, and allusion. There is the recurrent ingredient in this and other works of the reversal of play and caprice as totems and icons selected from the innocent vocabulary of childhood are poised towards our disillusionment and distress, rather than the built-in expectations of release and flight. Fueling this tendency is the impulse towards seemingly "superfluous" decoration, an element of the modernist picture which has decidedly halved critical attitudes into mutually exclusive camps: those who believe that borders, backgrounds, and "mosaic themes" are a symptom of decadence in the post-Cubist styles of the 30s, 40s, and 50s (citing Picasso as a primary example of this "relaxation" of serious painting's urgency), and those who contend (focusing on Matisse primarily) that the decorative ingredient of high modernist art is intrinsically bound to the development of necessary, fecund motifs and patterns of expression (especially with regard to the challenges posed against the three-dimensional illusionism of the canvas). Rachko plunges pell-mell into the heart of this controversy (which I believe still has aesthetic validity in the art of the 90s) by realizing her unconventional, very personalized visions (she is closest in temperament and execution to Giorgio de Chirico) through the "temporary" medium of pastel which she uncharacteristically and innovatively blends with heretofore unexplored, camera-oriented perspective (not to mention the equally unusual disinclination towards shades and hues given the conventionally diffused sense of pastel color).

-- Peter J. Dellolio