



Barbara  
Rachko





*He Just Stood There Grinning*,  
pastel on sandpaper, 58" x 38", 1995,  
(detail on cover).

All the greatest terrors are domestic—that, at least, is the implication of Barbara Rachko's deceptively bright, at first seemingly playful studies of exotic toys and figurines grouped together in an ordinary American house. In these pastel paintings and oversized photographs, the major pictorial elements—an elevated angle of view, raked lighting, illogical shadows, unnatural and highly keyed colors, flat surfaces set into complex three-dimensional patterns—all conspire to produce an unsettling effect. A homey interior, almost hysterical in its cheery middle-class niceness, is revealed as a site of primal fears and unspeakable urges.

Rachko constructs these images through a methodical, nearly ritualized procedure. Selecting an ordinary setting within her 70-plus-year-old Sears house, she first gathers together the ingredients of her setup: furnishings, rugs, dolls, masks, statuettes. Under strong directional illumination from tungsten studio lamps, these indigenous and "foreign" components (mostly from Mexico) are then intermingled until an uneasy balance is struck. In this way, Rachko breaches protective esthetic distance from the very beginning. The viewer's encounter will take place not in the imaginatively controllable confines of a studio or in some certifiably picturesque locale but, Hopper-fashion, in an everyday milieu—kitchen, living room, bathroom—freighted with intimate associations. Indeed, one could hardly invent a more highly valenced emblem of the American Dream than this: a readymade "home" ordered from a Sears catalogue, as though domestic tranquility were a consumer item to be purchased on the installment plan.

Rachko leaves the setup in place for several weeks, disrupting her daily routine (which ironically is, on a conceptual level, the end goal of the finished work) but also slowly evolving toward completion as she makes her intuitive adjustments. That process is guided, on the conscious level, both by formal relationships and by an emergent narrative. Like a

theatrical director working with a repertory cast, she develops a new story—invariably involving conflict and confrontation between the figurine-characters—that both shapes and is shaped by the changing arrangements.

When the tableau has settled into its final form, Rachko photographs it, using a 4-by-5 camera and wide-angle (typically 65 millimeter) lens. The resulting print, eerily nonphotographic-looking in its large scale (about 4 feet high), flat colors, and subdued textures, will often be exhibited with its companion pastel. This juxtaposition enables Rachko to highlight the qualities of each medium as well as the artistic choices she makes in shifting from a mechanical to a manual—and thus more freely adaptable—execution. In this formal dialogue, she takes her greatest inspiration, on the one hand, from the cool and highly theorized photographs of Sandy Skoglund, Cindy Sherman, and Laurie Simmons, and, on the other, from the myth-laden "real life" murals of Diego Rivera.

The large-format pastels themselves begin with a charcoal sketch that outlines the surface areas to be filled with intense solid color. The exceptional tooth of Rachko's paper allows her to build up 25 or 30 layers of pastel, until the finger-blended hues—most of them rich from the start—attain the glowing saturation of stained glass. In this 2-to-3-month process, shadows are often moved or created, local patterns simplified, colors changed and heightened, and perspectival lines subtly skewed. Inanimate shapes come to resemble pattern-and-decoration abstraction, while the figurine-characters take on a disturbing Chuckie-doll liveliness.

The final effect of these maneuvers is a calculated disjuncture, a willed schizophrenia. On the sensual level, the works convey a prettiness verging on kitsch. Yet their bizarre anecdotal content, fused with a dialectical structure, induces a troubling disorientation. Peering at the paintings through their windowlike Plexiglas mounts, we find ourselves in the surreal realm of the Mexican Day of the Dead (where adults dance with paper skeletons and children munch

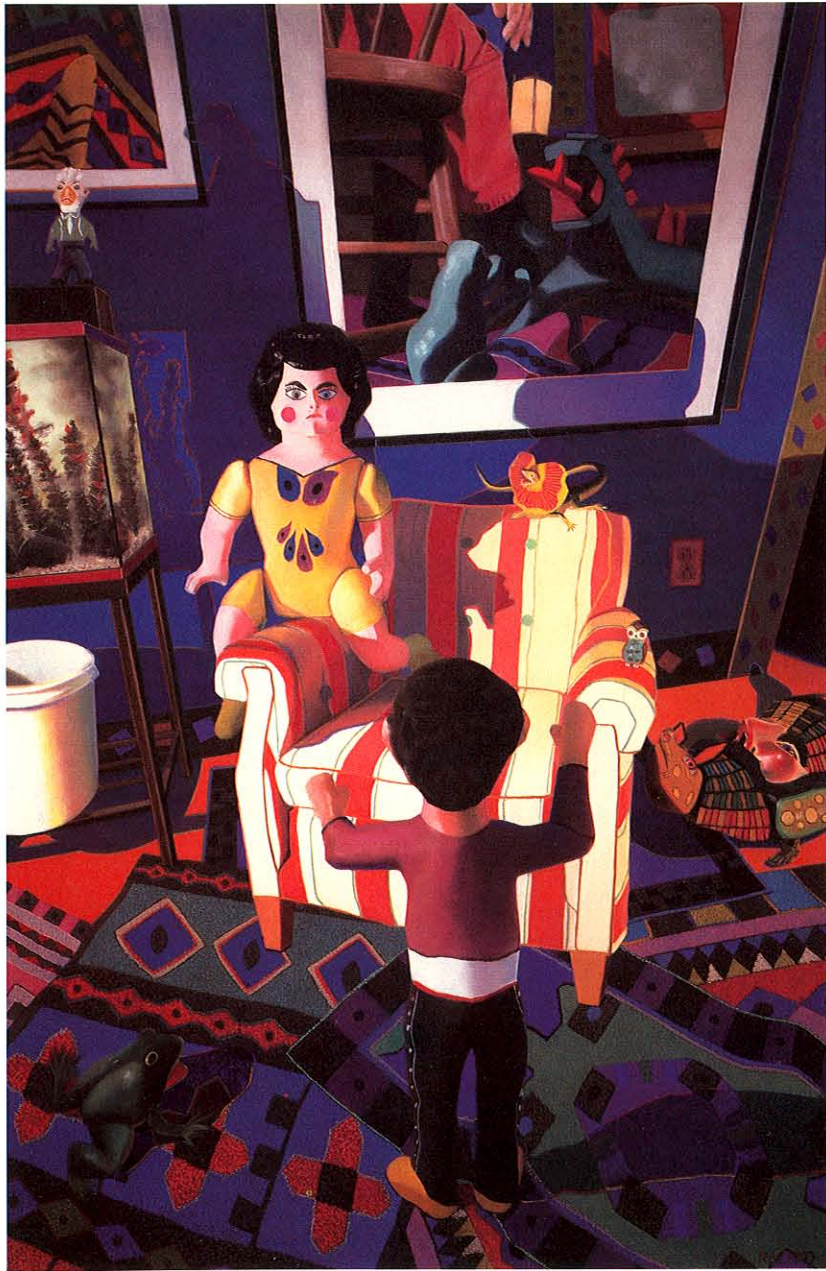
sugar-candy skulls) or of the Beatles' "Maxwell's Silver Hammer"—that jaunty, happy little tune about people being bludgeoned to death. Such paradoxical fantasy has a way of transacting serious psychological business.

In *The Magical Other*, for example a toy knight-on-horseback confronts an unlikely dragon—a scorpion figurine emerging from a cave of the unconscious recast as the oven interior of a kitchen stove. Thus the archetypal encounter with one's own demons retains some of its exotic trappings, but transpires on a diminished scale in an all-too-familiar contemporary setting. It is a devastating comment on the way we live—or fail to live—here and now.

*His Sudden Return Was Not Entirely Welcome* (bearing another typically loaded Rachko title) directly implicates the artist in the drama she has chosen to depict. A "returning" male statuette, seen from behind, stands before a female doll with his hands raised in a gesture of explication or surrender. She, meanwhile, straddles the phallic arm of an easy chair, thus complicating (if not reversing) the import of a conventional symbol for female complaisance—one which Matisse famously made his metaphor for art itself. Above them both, like a presiding spirit, hovers a painting-within-the-painting: a truncated image (after one of Rachko's own) that features the seated artist's leg and sovereign hand.

Most tellingly, *Us and Them*, a frankly autobiographical scene, makes completely explicit the psychic mechanism that Rachko's other works more obliquely imply. In their bedroom—that most interior, most private chamber within the domicile of the mind—the artist's domestic partner sits uncertainly on the edge of the bed while Rachko herself stands lost in self-reflection before a chest-of-drawers (so often the repository of personal secrets and surprises) topped by a three-paneled vanity mirror. Both figures are fully dressed in bright clothes, and both appear resigned to the presence of an equally florid toy crustacean that lurks on a wall and is reflected,





*His Sudden Return  
Was Not Entirely Welcome,*  
pastel on sandpaper,  
58" x 38", 1995.



*He Lost His Chance to Flee,*  
pastel on sandpaper,  
58" x 38", 1995.

impossibly, in a mirror wing where the artist's left profile should be. It is clear that the "alienness" that menaces (however charming its surface) originates within—or has been so thoroughly internalized as to be indistinguishable from the self.

Clearly the surface banality of Rachko's compositions serves a Trojan-horse function, allowing her to smuggle deeper challenges into the viewer's unconscious. These vignettes may have the quirky appeal of "Pee-Wee's Playhouse" (a place we can never see as entirely innocent now that the truth about Pee-Wee is out), but ultimately they operate in that same mental territory where Lewis Carroll's Red Queen is forever compulsively blurting, "Off with their heads!" Cartoonlike in their broad planes and exaggerated colors, these pictures seem—as do so many comic-strips and humorous films—overcharged with angst, awaiting a catharsis through vicarious violence. But the release never comes and the potential for mayhem remains: an adult fact of life.

Rachko's slant angle of view, therefore, is doubly significant. In one sense, she has effectively lifted the roof off a full-scale suburban dollhouse to stare directly down into the abode of denial, revealing a technicolor nightmare within. Yet another purport also lingers. In early youth, we play with dolls as a means for processing the present and imagining a future. What, then, does such activity mean for grown-ups, and especially artists? In Rachko's work, this "toying" with domestic comfort, this willful peering down and in, serves also as a means of looking back—to the earliest traumas of childhood, when we first discover that the world contains alluring dangers, and that something in us perversely delights at the thought.

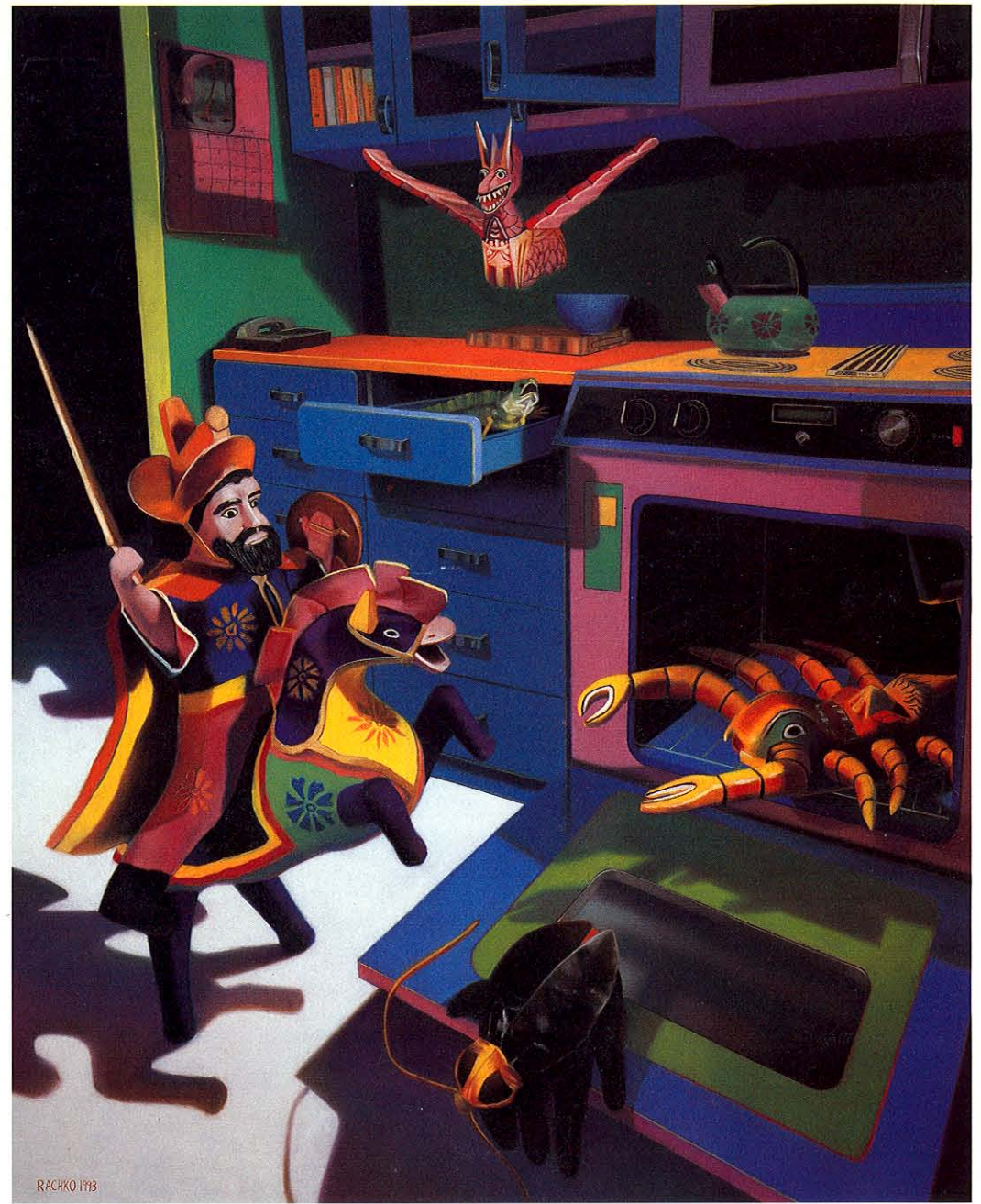
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*Us and Them,*  
pastel on sandpaper,  
48" x 38", 1993.



*The Magical Other,*  
pastel on sandpaper,  
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