



DOMESTIC THREATS

BARBARA
RACHKO

DOMESTIC THREATS

Pastel Paintings by

BARBARA RACHKO

Essays by

Gerrit Henry and Britta Konau

© Barbara Rachko, 2001
Photography: Bryan Jack
ISBN 0-9709404-0-8



THE LEADER CHALLENGED
58" x 38", pastel on sandpaper, 1997

BARBARA RACHKO: GODS AND MONSTERS

Gerrit Henry

Picture this: a room – be it bath, living room, or kitchen – surveyed close-up, yet more than a little aerially, from a decidedly vertiginous viewpoint just above; walls, floors, rugs, moldings, and furniture of said room all painted, sometimes in near-dayglo shades, always, with an eye to the domestically wild and wacky; and said room's inhabitants – Mexican *papier-mâché* horned "Judas" figures (burnt in effigy on the Saturday morning before Easter), "Day of the Dead" zombies on the same diminutive, but somehow horrifying scale, flying serpents with great, outstretched wings, small, rouge-cheeked *femme fatale* dolls, and more, and more.

Picture this, and you probably will still only have barely conceived of a Barbara Rachko painting, in all its glorious reality. The keynote of the *Domestic Threats* series is mystery, mystery and large dollops of contentual ambiguity, coupled with a devoutly sensuous pastel-on-sandpaper technique.

The sensuality comes as no surprise – Rachko likes the fact that her work is accessible to an eight-year-old, and the heightened colorism highlights the provocative storyline. Adults are considered, too, of course: the work is consistently obscure, yet open to interpretation, malign, yet generous to a fault, all the sort of thing that might attract grown-up fanciers of contemporary art. To prove the point, Rachko has shown at Manhattan's Brewster Arts, The Art Alliance, and many galleries, museums and universities throughout the United States, including Gallery Bergelli in Larkspur, California; the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio; the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia; the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut; and Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia.

But what's a New York artist doing with all those *papier-mâché* figures? They represent, for Rachko, an alternative to the United States, with its military-industrial culture, its gross commercialism, and its relative neglect of artists.

"Mexico is a much more spiritual place than the United States," she says – it's an observation, if not a protest. "In this respect it's the opposite of this country. Mexico is a spiritual home for me. The two hundred-plus native Indian cultures mixed with Catholicism to create new beliefs – I find that fascinating." When on vacations in Mexico, Rachko spends much of her time in the local mask shops, markets, and bazaars searching for the figures who will later populate her paintings. When she returns to New York, she reads prodigiously and tries to find out as much about them as she can.

Rachko spends weeks setting up and lighting those Mexican objects – and carved wooden animals, masks, puppets, books, magazines, rugs, and tchotchkesque pieces of furniture – in scenarios, the titles of which smack of stiff-upper-lip British military drama like *He Was So in Need of Botany* or of old proverbial self-help manuals – *Practical Advice on Waiting*. Rachko determines the exact, if ever-skewed, angle of the final scene with a photograph, which she then uses as reference material for a preliminary charcoal drawing. Color and design are achieved over a period of months, with the artist applying pastel lustily and, as mentioned, sensually, with the final product sometimes running to 20 pastel layers.





ANSWERING THE CALL
58" x 38", pastel on sandpaper, 2000

"The several months I put into a piece account for the intensity of the design," Rachko says. And the vivid, on-canvas life of the figures? "I animate them when I render them. I think of each painting as a movie still. The figures are actors in a repertory company. That's why they reappear in different roles in different paintings. This work is strongly influenced by filmmaking conventions. As I set up and light the figures, my job is very much that of a film director and cinematographer.

"When I finally got to these works – after a number of years doing rather traditional portrait painting – it was 'full speed ahead!' I had a lot of territory to cover, a lot of time to make up for."

Today, no one would accuse Rachko of being a slouch – or an aesthetic shirker. She has won awards and/or glowing letters from the Whitney Museum's Barbara Haskell, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Nan Rosenthal, the Studio Museum in Harlem's Lowery Sims and Thelma Golden, the National Museum of American Art's Virginia Mecklenburg, and from feminist writer and scholar Whitney Chadwick. Her internal energy seems boundless, and her actual achievement on a par.

Still, in the end it is the work that an artist is judged by, and by which she judges herself. Recent pieces show no lapse in technical ingenuity (and integrity) and mesmerizing subject matter – in fact, they demonstrate a definite increase. As I sit here, writing, I have at hand the Polaroid for the set-up of a very recent Rachko. Her doll-like fellows have been pared down to ornamental essentials: a single-horned goddess is seen standing center in a room filled with "moderne" caned chair next to end-table to the left and shelves-full of weighty tomes to the right. Our deity stands on a welter of Navajo rugs, whose design component itself is so strong that one can feel Rachko's successful struggle to out-design them in her parlay of three. Bottom center is a zombie-skeleton-outline figure (a little Dubuffet, anyone?), seen only from overhead, in the form of upraised arms and a mop of frizzy gray hair, apparently about to move in on our queen in her own particular "Day of the Dead." Yet help is on the way: in a doorway flanked by bookshelves and the furniture stands the queen's king, all dappled, shining pink flesh, with matching single-horned hat, ready, we imagine, to help his goddess put the monsters to flight.

I say, "we imagine," because one can never be completely sure that one is reading a Rachko "correctly." The artist has learned one of the lessons of modernism well: the medium – in the form of ripe pastel and sub-voodoo dolls – is the message. Still, she is post-modernistic enough to broadly tease us with latent content, content that becomes fully manifest in our imaginations. What we bring to a Rachko, in other words, we get back, bountifully. May the comedy of terrors begin!





SCENE FIVE: KITCHEN
20" x 26", pastel on sandpaper, 1998



HE WAS SO IN NEED OF BOTANY
58" x 38", pastel on sandpaper, 1998



SCENE NINE: LIVING ROOM
20" x 26", pastel on sandpaper, 1999



PRACTICAL ADVICE ON WAITING
58" x 38", pastel on sandpaper, 2000



HE URGED HER TO ABDICATE
58" x 38", pastel on sandpaper, 1997

HE URGED HER TO ABDICATE AND FILM NOIR

Britta Konau

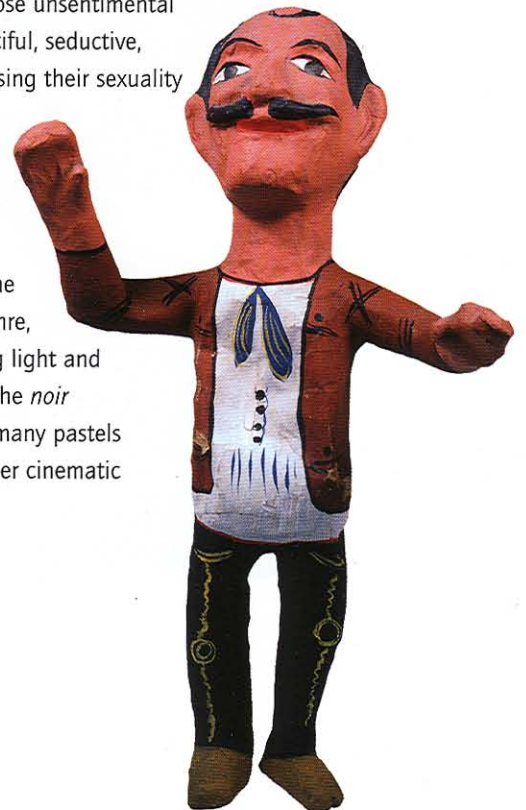
— She is absolutely sure of herself. She knows that he is attracted to her – to her nonchalant disdain, to her body, half revealed and half hidden, to her tough good looks. She's The Queen – he can ask her to abdicate as fervently as he wants, but his words will only amuse her. Not that he isn't good looking, actually, rather dapper in his tailored Mexican outfit and bushy moustache, but she is not going to give up everything she's fought so hard for. He will do what she asks. There is no way back, only one down, and if that's where she'll be going, it won't be without her high heels.

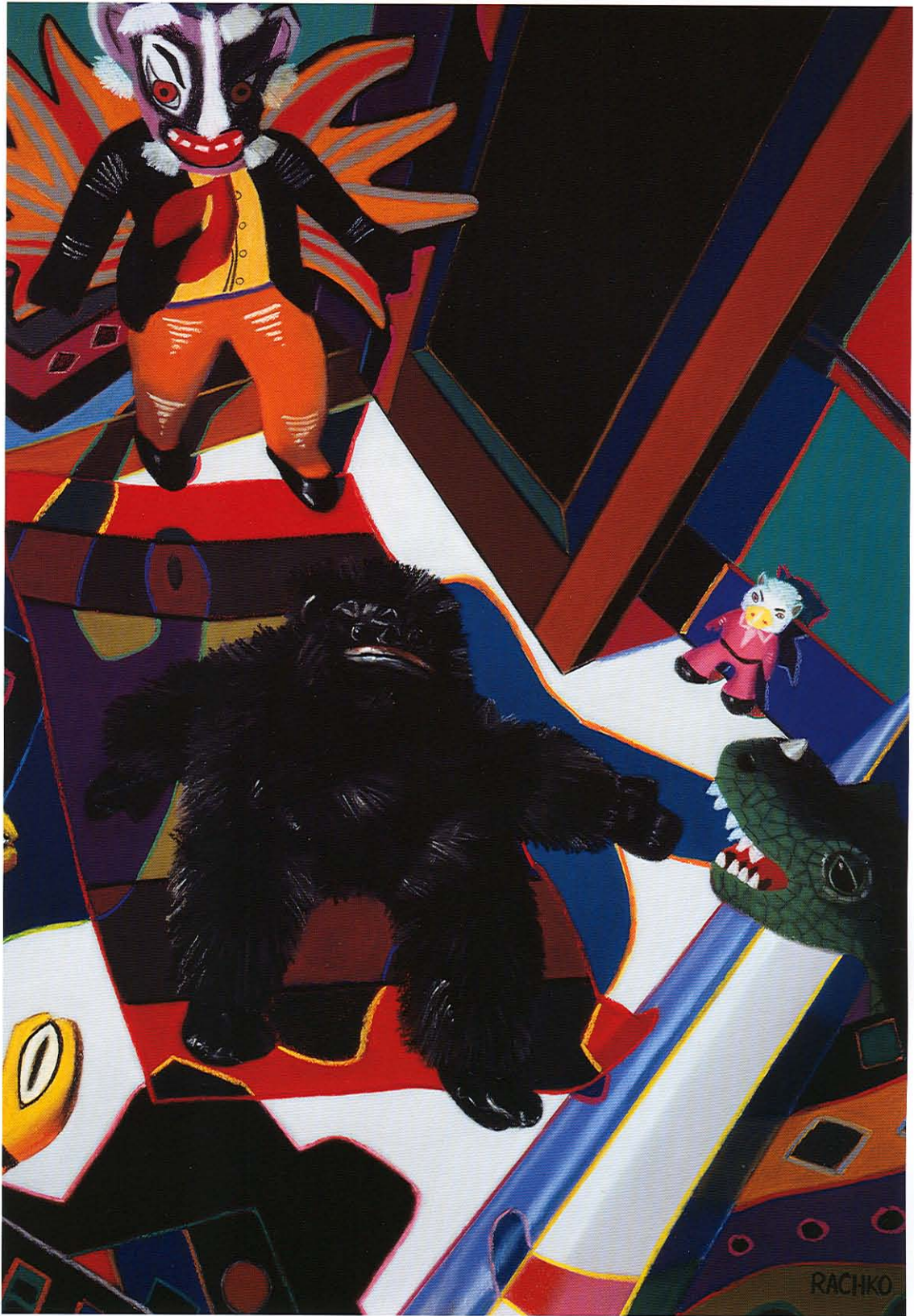
Film *Noir* of the 1940s and 50s is characterized by dark moods of alienation, melancholy, bleakness, entrapment, lack of sentimentality, moral corruption, and evil, all presented as symptoms of contemporary society's malaise. *Noir* movies usually feature complex narratives, crisp dialogue, and disillusioned characters, as well as the frequent use of flashback and voice-over narrators. Events often take place at night, preferably on wet urban streets. A signature "look" characterizes the genre, a look created by unusual camera angles, expressionistic contrasts of light and deep shadows, and disorienting visual schemes.

Attacks on cherished societal values, such as righteousness and courage, characterize the crime stories at the core of most films *noir*. Male protagonists are often private detectives or other loners, sometimes thieves and murderers, working stealthily by themselves in the face of a moral dilemma. The mood is usually one of cynicism, post-war anxiety, and suspicion.

Women, who during the war had entered the workforce to replace men fighting overseas, now seemed to threaten traditional values of family and home with their newly gained self-determination. In the majority of films *noir* there is no family to speak of and, while fighting for their independence, the protagonists in the end are destroyed – reinscribing the importance of marriage and child-rearing. Consequently, female roles in film *noir* can easily be divided into two general categories: the dull, marriageable woman whose attempts to lure the male hero into a conventional institution threaten his very existence, and the *femme fatale*, by far the more interesting type, whose unsentimental independence ultimately leads to self-destruction. These *femmes* are beautiful, seductive, duplicitous, and double-crossing; charming and tough at the same time, using their sexuality and self-command to drive men to murder.

Many writers have commented on Barbara Rachko's passion for film, and film *noir* in particular, and the ways it has significantly influenced her work. Very much in keeping with the storylines of film *noir* movies is the overall impression that something has definitely gone awry in the world she portrays in her images. And while film *noir* is a largely black-and-white genre, Rachko's riotous colors and patterns do not diminish the contrast of strong light and dramatic shadows in her pastels. Their crispness, in fact, perfectly mirrors the *noir* aesthetic. While *He Urged Her to Abdicate* (1997) is just one of Rachko's many pastels to display parallels to film *noir*, it serves as an especially rich example of her cinematic inspiration and allows for a wider scope of critical appreciation.





SCENE TEN: BATHROOM
26" x 20", pastel on sandpaper, 1999

The title *He Urged Her to Abdicate* tells a story, in the spirit of many film *noir* titles such as *They Won't Believe Me* or *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. However, the title also reminds of the usually male "voice of god" narration style often found in film *noir*. At the same time the phrase also neatly catches the distinctive sound of the gratuitous and titillating *noir* movie poster, screaming such enticements as "They couldn't trust each other with men...money...or guns!" or "Living on the edge of evil and violence."

The scene takes place in a narrow bathroom, possibly in a basement. The space is claustrophobic, with skewed angles, tilted verticals, and plenty of dark shadows, all set against an intense color scheme to create an atmosphere of gloom. The scene is presented at an unusually high angle, strengthening the sense of entrapment. And the fact that we are looking at Mexican *papier-mâché* figures, puppets, and wood carvings playing out a storyline in the bathroom of a home finds parallels in films *noir* that casually mix the ordinary with the macabre or bizarre.

The female protagonist is a pure *femme fatale*: sassy in her red, seductive dress, heavily made up, a cigarette dangling from her hand. Precariously perched on the side of the bathtub, she seems cornered but proudly defiant. Her companion is a mere backdrop for her staging, and appears, like many men in film *noir*, to be weak, a victim of her allure and determination. There is no evidence of children – unless, terrible thought that it is, we assume that the fantastical creature and other little people surrounding the couple are their offspring. This seems unlikely; as in all of Rachko's work, her figures read more as alien intruders into a home, beings who are under normal circumstances inanimate but have now come alive. The resulting impression of threat is very much in keeping with the sinister atmosphere of film *noir*. (What is that strange outline on the rug just at the edge of the image's lower frame? Is it the shadow of a behatted and trench-coated private eye?).

While *He Urged Her to Abdicate* does not include a window in its picture frame, one can safely assume that it is a night scene, like all of Rachko's mature pastels. The imagery bears the intensity of a nightmare, and also parallels film *noir's* obsession with dark ambience, indoors or out. The low-key lighting used by Rachko and film *noir* directors produces prominent shadows associated with night, emotion, tension, and mystery. It is our dark, uncivilized side that both Rachko and film *noir* explore.

In *He Urged Her to Abdicate*, as in true film *noir* movies, there is no certain or happy ending, sugarcoated for easy digestion. Our *femme fatale* will not abdicate, whatever surrender he is urging on her, and what that refusal entails for her future is left for us to imagine. Judging by the atmosphere of entrapment, however, we can be quite sure that it is nothing positive.





SCENE EIGHT: KITCHEN
20" x 26", pastel on sandpaper, 1998



NO CURE FOR INSOMNIA
58" x 38", pastel on sandpaper, 1999



SCENE TWELVE: LIVING ROOM
26" x 20", pastel on sandpaper, 2001

Front Cover

NO CURE FOR INSOMNIA

58" x 38", pastel on sandpaper, 1999
(detail)

Back Cover

SCENE SEVEN: LIVING ROOM

26" x 20", pastel on sandpaper, 1998



Barbara Rachko
208 West 29th Street, # 605
New York, NY 10001
T/F: 212-643-6293
brachko@erols.com