



CLEARING

Sebastian Black

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by Adam McEwen

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Interview

ART

*DOG SHOW:
ADAM
MCEWEN
INTERVIEWS
SEBASTIAN
BLACK*



PHOTO BY COLIN DODGSON

The work in 24-year-old, New York-based painter Sebastian Black's debut solo show, "The Playful Paw-Strokes of the Wilderness," sounds simple. At Chelsea's Kathleen Cullen Fine Art, he will show paintings of dogs comprising two gentle drooping curves that form a docile pet with long, flat ears. The enclosed space is filled with a patchwork of triangles, horns, and candy-colored pizza slices. Black's paintings have a thick, rich surface, and the longer you look at them, the more the shapes lend themselves to re-configuration as different characters, particularly a female nude. The experience of looking at Black's paintings is like Magic Eye or the primordial scene: you can only see the naughty truth, once the the puppy's nose is revealed as a swatch of pubic hair. Black's friend and mentor, [Adam McEwen](#), asks him why it's necessary to tame his paintings:



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ADAM MCEWEN: How many of these dog paintings do you think you have made so far?

SEBASTIAN BLACK: I think there are 11 or 12, only eight of which I am comfortable wrapping up and saying, "I'm done." And then there are a lot of other similar ones—dog piles of them.

MCEWEN: What do you call the paintings, when they're in the studio?

BLACK: Puppies.

MCEWEN: Are there grown-ups?

BLACK: These are the kinds of dogs that kids draw, and which would be young themselves, with big soft eyes and floppy ears.



DOGGY DEATH MASK, 2010; MYSTICAL WAYSIDE
MARKER, 2010.
COURTESY THE ARTIST.



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MCEWEN: I keep reading articles recently about how humans respond to big eyes, soft eyes and fluffy fur.

BLACK: Maybe people are genetically predetermined to like paintings with like soft eyes and fur—I hope so.

MCEWEN: And you grew up in New York?

BLACK: Yeah, in Chelsea.

MCEWEN: Does that mean that you were going to galleries?

BLACK: My mom took me to museums a lot. She was a painter; she studied at the Studio School, like in the 1970s—a student of a student of [Abstract Expressionist painter] Hans Hofmann. She is one generation removed from that. So she took me to look at painting shows a lot. But I don't think that 1980s paintings, the kind that would be in SoHo, were really up her alley.

MCEWEN: Do you think of these puppy paintings as New York paintings?

BLACK: Sort of. These are probably influenced by the paintings I would see in museums; the scale and the tight way they are painted is definitely a reaction to those big, loose 1980s paintings.

MCEWEN: These paintings are funny. They seem to have an awareness that the activity of making them is ludicrous... but still worth doing.

BLACK: But still worth doing. They seem quite simple, but when you start dealing with them you realize that there has been a lot of time spent in them. It's a push and a pull. They make fun of the act of painting, but they participate in it, too.



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PHOTO BY COLIN DODGSON

MECEWEN: Did you try out other motifs?

BLACK: For a while I wasn't oil painting. The dog seemed loaded enough as a symbol to get me to dive back into it. I tried other shapes, like carrots [Laughs], those cartoon traps made up of a box and string. The dog is the figure I kept coming back to.

MCEWEN: Maybe because you anthropomorphize it, because you can't help but give it a character. When you look at it, it becomes a woman. I see them as masks, too.

BLACK: They don't really look like any dog that you would see walking down the street, and they don't really look like any torso that you would see in a life-drawing class. But the symbol suggests these two things and at the same time they are suggesting the whole field of abstract painting, obliquely. Then there are lots of greens mixed with oranges, which make a hot khaki color that you don't see too much. There are no bright primary colors, although in one painting there might be one color popping out, but surrounded by boggy colors.

MCEWEN: That stops them from being too pop.



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BLACK: I think so. It creates a tension where the effect is not just jokey. And it relates back to the idea of a mask...woodenness. You can create a sensation where you are not exactly sure what you are meant to be looking at. They are built up in lots and lots of different layers of paint and thinner and stuff. So they don't look like quick paintings, you know. They look like they are super worked.

MCEWEN: Does that make the dogs look like they have been thinking?

BLACK: I think what it does; it emphasizes the fact that so much time has been spent on that weird ridiculous dog image.

MCEWEN: Do you think painting needs to have that element that in-built questioning device?

BLACK: Yeah, I do. Because they are dogs, there is some indication that it would not be OK if the style of the painting turned too abstract. It would be hard to pull off. It would just be another pretty abstract painting.

MCEWEN: But in order to even exist, it needs to believe in painting. It gets into the land of [Philip] Guston—his ambivalence and doubt about painting, but his commitment and belief....I remember the scenes from like late 1960, early 1970s—simple Guston drawings with big fat marks. It was like this huge door springs open of thought.

BLACK: Well it's interesting you say that, because in a lot of the early Guston, he uses a horizon to structure the picture. Even the weird Abstract Expressionists ones are still pulled by gravity. These need the canvas, and in some of the pictures the dog gets so large that he seems to get anchored by the end of the picture.

MCEWEN: They need the edge of the canvas. Yeah, I love these. You should keep riding. There is no reason not to...With Josh Smith, it's amazing how he keeps rolling with it. It's pretty amazing to make the same look different. How many of them do you work on the same time?



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BLACK: Four or five, but I can be done with one and go back to it and add two colors to it and put it back up on the wall for another three weeks. So it's kind of like anything else that's in the studio.

MCEWEN: When do you know they're done.

BLACK: When it's done. I'll hide a painting from myself, to finish it, sometimes.

MCEWEN: Or take it out before you ruin it, which happens sometimes. How many do you think you will do?

BLACK: I think they have legs—

MCEWEN: Well, they don't have legs...

BLACK: He has shoulders and little stumpy hands.