

MODERN PAINTERS

Erik Parker
By Scott Indrisek
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Parker's vibrantly colored, eye-popping figurative paintings might not be in lockstep with all the trends of contemporary art, but he couldn't care less. The Brooklyn-based artist is part of a major exhibition on view through the end of February 2013 at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, in Ridgefield, Connecticut, which includes his irreverent and text-heavy map paintings and drawings. Scott Indrisek talked to the artist about his latest body of work, influenced by the jungle landscapes of Henri Rousseau, which will debut this month at Paul Kasmin Gallery, in New York.



SI: *You've mentioned you occasionally take artistic models, like Francis Bacon's portraits, and push them further in your own work.*

EP: In the history of figuration in the last century, it's Bacon and Picasso who are the standouts for me. When I was starting to delve into portraiture, Bacon was the person that I looked at to see if I could push that to my idea of extreme. I wasn't talking about things living in a space, these were obviously completely made-up; I wasn't referencing the real. Bacon got it. I know his angle was completely different than mine, but it's almost a post-figurative figure, in a way.

SI: *So why the jungle now?*

EP: Who's really tackled that since Rousseau, right? And through the jungle, you can get apocalyptic, you can talk about isolation, you can talk about form, landscapes, movement, travel.

SI: *Are these paintings coming from a real place, or is it fantasy?*

EP: *Out of the Ark* is based on Maya Bay, in Thailand. You know, it's like *wanting* to travel. If I could go there, it'd be really great. I found it just Googling "great beaches."

SI: *What are those spikes on the beach, in the painting?*

EP: Blades of grass. It's a riff on how they do hair in comic book language. That's how I paint blades of grass. Each one has its own identity. Each line matters. A customized version of grass: They come off as spikes.

SI: *When you first started painting, were you influenced more by illustrative work? Cartoons? Street art?*

EP: I entered the art scene around 1998. I did pull from Peter Saul, the Chicago Imagists, R. Crumb, things you weren't supposed to really look at. Kind of a Mike Kelley philosophy. Now it's okay. But in the early '90s, people looked at David Salle, Eric Fischl.

SI: *Despite these jungle environments, are you more of a city person?*

EP: Oh, yeah. Do you know the work of Joseph Yoakum? This guy used to sell these drawings on the steps of the Chicago Art Institute. The Hairy Who guys were going to school, and they were into him. His paintings are of places that exist, but the paintings look nothing like those places. He never really

left Chicago. I feel that my schedule is a lot like this, where I can't really go anywhere, but I'd like to, so I'm making up fake places with real names.

SI: *Vicarious travel.*

EP: Right. I never even really leave Williamsburg. I maybe go to Greenpoint. If I travel, it's like to Hong Kong, an art fair for three days, holding a glass of something and talking to people. Not that I'm complaining.

SI: *Since you've started showing, how has the reception to your work changed?*

EP: It seems odd that I use color in my painting, or any kind of recognizable image. Now it seems like everyone's into a gray shape. You go to an art fair, you can't tell who's who.

SI: *Is there a peer group that you feel an affinity with?*

EP: KAWS. Jules de Balincourt. I like Dana Schutz's work a lot. Peter Doig. Chris Ofili. Eddie Martinez.

SI: *Do you gain anything from looking at work that's not as figurative or that's totally different from what you're doing?*

EP: Yes. It's often sculpture. Isa Genzken? Love. Rachel Harrison – completely opposite of what I do. Haim Steinbach. He's awesome. Jeff Koons.

SI: *You've painted still lifes modeled on precursors by Matisse, for instance. What is it about still lifes that interests you?*

EP: I hated them for many years. And then as I got older, the more I understood painting, still lifes just appealed to me. Then I saw a Roy Lichtenstein show at Gagosian, paintings from the '70s and '80s. I was inspired. It's a big trope. How do you make that and claim it for yourself?