

James Barsness at George Adams

Art in America, October 2006

Though less collaged than his previous work, the eight paintings that made up James Barsness's recent exhibition are still dense with obscure imagery and obsessive detail. Loaded with cryptic symbolism, they offer private narratives steeped in archetypal themes: birth, childhood and death, sex and violence. Dominated by zoomorphic heathens performing bizarre rituals in fairy-tale worlds, these paintings are consummate grotesqueries, supreme amalgams of wholly incongruous forms.

Indeed, the series is rooted in some of the high points of the grotesque—Bosch and Brueghel, Art Nouveau, Hindu ornamentation, Saturday morning cartoons, Viking woodcarving and Hiberno-Saxon interlacing. The latter two influences are especially prominent, as Barsness presents similarly intricate mixtures of human, animal and plant parts. Framed by vinelike borders, these acidly colored paintings are infested with serpentine tendrils, which occasionally form obscure words and phrases—potential keys to otherwise impenetrable pictograms. The extreme illusionism and complexity of these embellishments belies their doodlelike appearance, divulging a highly controlled and deliberate draftsmanship.

In *The Distractions* (2005), a wild-eyed, stiletto-heeled cat-woman is set to whack a subservient dog-man with a shovel. This ferocious feline wears a chain-link belt adorned with red and blue pacifiers, while a hideous buck-

toothed baby gnaws on her metal cone brassiere. Swirling around the figures in leaflike lettering is a line from a John Ashbery poem: "We must remember not to be a part of the cat's plan for us." Whatever its original significance, the verse is here linked to an unseemly mix of maternity and sadism. Yet, such blatant misogyny is tempered by the work's exaggeration and lewd humor.

Bifrost Bridge (2005-06) is decidedly graver. A blue satyr lies upon an intricate mass of twigs floating between two shores. The subject complements Barsness's affinity for Viking art: in Norse mythology, Bifrost is the bridge between mortal and divine worlds. Adrift upon his burial ship, the protagonist is thus embarking upon his final voyage, while mothers, lovers and a pirate wail in grief around him. A memorial to someone, the painting epitomizes Barsness's ability to provoke profound responses via a seemingly capricious style.

Each picture offers a similar mix of seduction, contradiction and black comedy. These hallucinatory paintings often do not "work" in the traditional sense; they are neither visually nor conceptually coherent. Yet, Barsness's Saturnalias are strangely moving, triggering primal desires, dreams and fears. Like all good grotesques, these unearthly icons tell us something about what it means to be human.

—Cary Levine



James Barsness: *Bifrost Bridge*, 2005-06, acrylic, ink and paper on canvas, 51½ by 69½ inches; at George Adams.