

James Barsness at George Adams

For close to 10 years now, James Barsness has been making a name for himself as a creator of highly detailed, unusually complex and often frankly sexual art. His often tongue-in-cheek portrayals of physical appetite, merged with a masterful appreciation of materials, which here included ballpoint pen and acrylic on paper collaged onto canvas, make him an artist of accomplished idiosyncrasy. The five large paintings shown in this exhibition, "It's a Beautiful World," maintain an open dialogue with the past as they incorporate contemporary themes and images.

The works represent self-contained environments. In *The Palace* (1998), the discrepancy between public and private life is made clear in vividly drawn figures which bring to mind the half-human, half-animal creatures seen in Bosch's paintings. The titular palace fills the right side of the painting. Cutout windows afford glimpses of various aspects of desire: on the first floor, a man pours water on a couple making love; one flight

up, a thug in a clown's cap robs a man in a clown costume; on the top, a royal couple, the man holding the woman's left breast, calmly gaze out at the viewer. On the left is a medieval scene in which strange hybrid figures ride horses across rounded hills. In the upper left is a complicated pink starburst design which, close inspection reveals, consists of photos of breasts and vulvas taken from pornographic magazines. The overall impact is allegorical: we are intended to read this intricate presentation of human activities as a reference to our insatiable physical needs, which no royal rank erases.

The Whole World 'Round (1998), a mixed-medium collage mounted on canvas, shows Barsness's holistic symbolism in full force. A sphere is rendered against dress patterns and grids connected by stars; the artist seems to refer to medieval astronomy. Across a landscape of trees, volcanic craters, hills and a few bodies of water, he scatters such images as a black-and-white butterfly with a human head, a paper bird with red and white wings, and a coiled snake with a human head sporting fangs. A sun with fiery rays drawn over a six-pointed star accentuates the deliberately anachronistic feeling of this painting. Repetitive landscape forms—hill-like mounds and evergreen foliage—provide a rhythmic background. Here Barsness's brash erotomania falls away and his passion for history takes over. It's the balance—or perhaps the conscious alternation—of epochs and visions that makes his art fascinating. —Jonathan Goodman

James Barsness: *The Whole World 'Round*, 1998, pastel, collage, acrylic, ink on canvas, 73 3/4 by 94 3/4 inches; at George Adams.

