

Roy DeForest

at George Adams

Within a few years of joining Robert Arneson, William T. Wiley, Wayne Thiebaud and others at UC Davis in the mid-1960s, Roy DeForest developed his signature contribution to that amazingly fertile milieu. To his pictures of wild-eyed hounds, horses, birds and humans wandering a dense, primitive dreamscape that may be Northern California, he brought the accessibility and demystification of the art-making process that is central to Pop. But he stuck with another sort of mystification: the cult of the artist's personality. In DeForest's version of Bay Area eccentricity, delight in color, surface and pattern is as palpable as Matisse's, and time has not mellowed the willful ham-handedness of his painterly attack.

DeForest's first solo show since 1997 included eight paintings in acrylic on canvas, all about 5 feet to a side and completed in 2005. Several feature a central personage attended by ancillary

sidekicks, co-conspirators and alter egos. *A Country Life* evokes the tradition of the commemorative portrait; a robust blond farmer or cowboy, in his Sunday best, is surrounded by medallionlike portraits of horses, cattle, poultry, perhaps family members and numerous garrulous hounds. They are shown against a backdrop of loose grids suggesting cultivated fields or gardens. *Present Company* presents its cast of big-nosed folks, dogs and birds in four distinct strata. Spiked dots applied directly from a tube of paint cover the faces of many characters, connoting not a skin condition but a more general malaise. Elsewhere, blunt squirts of paint vie with passages of surprising delicacy, as in the sly, nasty bunnies in *Song of the Blackbird*.

As in some pre-Renaissance painting, the relative sizes of the players might imply narrative hierarchy, but among the most pungent portraits are the smallest, like the demented, apple-red pup who reigns mascotlike at the top center of *The Saga of the Shepard Brothers*. Almost everyone appears a little uneasy in these paintings, uptight but zoned-out. The lounging avians in *The Birdwatcher* are oblivious to the blank-eyed, daydreaming humans below, whose reveries

seem to include an anxious hound and a bristling baboon. All four fellows have funny hats and noses; one has infiltrated the birds' treetop domain with the aid of a beak disguise. The painting suggests a symbolic approach to color, with earthy colors at bottom giving way to a bejeweled, heavily ornamented sky in tropical hues.

Reminders of DeForest's contribution to the rich tradition of California assemblage, his paintings' custom-built frames feature yet more funk, like the

heads attached to *North of Patagonia*, some of which might be the thought bubbles of others. Among these somnambulant, sightless (or all-seeing) zombies is the show's most motivated character, a red-nosed hooligan with a brush cut and his "game face" on. Scabrous paint, like mishandled grout in candy colors, yields, in this atypically sweeping canvas, to a radiant, palm-flecked hillside.

—Stephen Maine

Art in America, April 2006

Roy DeForest: *Saga of the Shepard Brothers*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 64 by 60 inches; at George Adams.

