

Ashley Bickerton

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Ashley Bickerton's art has always operated within a dialectic of moralism and depravity. His paintings of open-shirted, liquor-swilling Caucasian tourists partying with voluptuous hula girls read as explicit—even dogmatic—condemnations of excess, and this was the case well before Bickerton's relocation in 1993 from New York to the Indonesian island of Bali. More of a proselytizer than his contemporary Jeff Koons, Bickerton broke out in the mid-1980s with "self-portraits" that took the form of amalgams of corporate logos. What followed was a series of brilliant, exquisitely fabricated, utterly weird objects that could be characterized as ecological ciphers. Often filled with various imports and exports (rice, grain, trash) and appended with neatly rolled mats or padding, these boxy sculptures looked like overelaborate survival kits. In Bickerton's work, the present is tenuous and scary, at once gluttonous and spiritually starved.

Bickerton has continued making three-dimensional objects, although his mixed-media paintings of tropical dystopias populated by buxom "native" women and the gentlemen tourists who ogle and toast them have taken precedence of late. Photographs of models (Bickerton paints directly on their bodies) are printed on canvas, touched up with acrylic, and set within ornate wooden frames replete with handcrafted scenes of local peasants, mother-of-pearl designs, and island tropicalia. While some earlier paintings from this body of work depict sexless green heads with ominously empty eyes, here Bickerton's carousers have the island mostly to themselves. Their skin tone is a wash of psychedelic blues, greens, reds, and yellows—radioactive and nonhuman.

Tableaux of leisure abound: A man and woman canoe on crystal-clear waters; the same pair read in a hammock, merrily trashing the landscape with their waste; robust women, fruits, and pigs are thrust in the face of the viewer. Has Bickerton's debauched antihero achieved domestic bliss?

Bickerton's work stinks of autobiography and allegory. The psychological impact of his imagery combined with a consistent penchant for self-portraiture raise the possibility that the male character in these paintings is Bickerton himself, basking in the hedonistic squalor of the equatorial good life. But confessional art has never been Bickerton's cup of tea. His logo works, as well as two bronze busts sprouting tropical flora seen here, feel like parodies of the genre of portraiture, whose conventional aim is to capture individual essence. Instead, Bickerton portrays personality tropes. His art caricatures the concept of conforming to archetypes, of flocking in groups.

Bickerton is interested in Indonesian craft and the use of local materials such as coconut for his frames, and in notions of primitivism in the twenty-first century. His art remains adamantly moral; whatever pleasure he depicts is always irresponsible, although in this exhibition the imagery is less debauched and more a caricature of conventional relationships. This slight toning down is something of a disappointment; Bickerton is best (and funniest) when he's angry. Even so, while ribald humor and offbeat mysticism aren't uncommon among contemporary artists, Bickerton's ability to relate how and where he lives to ecological irresponsibility and cultural imperialism—seemingly a critique of his adopted homeland's tourist clientele—keeps him among their sharpest users.



Ashley Bickerton, *Yellow Canoe*, 2006, acrylic and digital print on canvas, wood, coconut, mother-of-pearl, and coin-inlaid frame, 72 x 86 x 7".

—Nick Stillman