

JOHN BANKSTON

When I begin a painting, my first concern is how to integrate painting and drawing. In fact, my work is primarily concerned with the practices of painting – the technical aspects of moving paint around to create an image. But in doing that physical act I allow narrative into the work. The painting itself is a narrative of its making.

My work has involved an ongoing “visual novel,” *The Capture and Escape of Mr. M*. This novel exists not as a printed book but in the form of drawings and paintings; the narrative is conveyed through small drawings or paintings. Large paintings represent key scenes from the storyline, which begins with the abduction of Mr. M by Mr. L. Held in Mr. L’s leather lair (a cave in the Rainbow Forest), Mr. M eventually escapes with the help of various forest characters who wage war against Mr. L and his henchmen. The succeeding installments of the story follow Mr. M as he makes his way through this strange new land and manages to avoid the clutches of Mr. L.

The paintings in the Rubell Family Collection are from the chapter, “Man’s Country.” What interests me is the notion of a hyper masculine secret society. In this chapter, Mr. M, in his continual escape from Mr. L, comes to a clearing in the forest where there appears to be a circus. He discovers that the performers are also the audience and that the performances consist of dressing up and parading.

The setting for the work, Rainbow Forest, is a fantasy land – a place where the inhabitants are free to become the characters of their most secret desires. At the same time, the characters in the work are rooted in my day-to-day experience of life in San Francisco (perhaps a kind of fantasy land itself). The concept of “fantasy” is often thought to belong to the realm of escapism. But I like to think of fantasy as a way of re-imagining our world. It is a means of stepping outside one’s known territory, a means of breaking boundaries.

The paintings and drawings engage the visual language of coloring books. Formally, this idiom allows for the integration of painting and

drawing as well as figuration and abstraction. In the work, line is used to impose the boundaries of the forms. Color may describe the forms, but it does not always respect the boundaries of the line, as it can ooze and seep over the edges. I want the tension of “staying within the lines” to be seen literally and metaphorically.

In general, the work deals with transformation and identity. I approach these ideas from different levels. A coloring book page is about transformation. Through the act of applying color, the page goes from being a general image to a personal expression. I want the viewer to be aware of the “color” or ethnicity/identity of the characters in the work. I hope the viewer will think about a blank coloring page and the choices one makes when coloring the image. The images in the work are about people who have redrawn personal boundaries and have “colored” themselves outside the lines of received cultural norms. It is my hope that the viewer will be able to step into this fantasy world and for a moment live life “colored” outside the lines.