



REVIEWS OCT. 06, 2014



Michael Bauer

NEW YORK,
at Lisa Cooley

by Becky Brown

All the paintings in Michael Bauer's second solo exhibition at Lisa Cooley have a similar composition: a central mass of miscellaneous marks and symbols that scatters like shrapnel toward the edges. The 11-foot-wide *Creme Wars—Snoopie* (2014), the show's title work, suggests a form of contemporary history painting. The buff-colored ground is packed with distorted body parts (often hyperactive fingers), floating geometric slabs, ghostly nebulae and oozing drips. Viewers may feast on a full spectrum of colors (from toxic neon green and rich orange to gray and sepia tones) as well as techniques (from broad gesture to intricate detailing, from wet-on-wet impasto to delicate wash). Bodies sometimes cohere in the manner of a Surrealist exquisite corpse, but often stray hands, heads and crotches are lodged in the swarm or tacked on in the margins.

Lines, zigzags and squiggles that feel more like drawing than painting often function as a fade-out, resembling the flicker of melody or bare bass line which gradually transitions a "wall of sound" into silence. At their centers, these canvases are a visual equivalent to Phil Spector's self-proclaimed Wagnerian vision: layering and juxtaposing many styles of painting into high-impact symphonies that build harmony through difference.

A series of screen prints, "Baba vs Seger 1-11" (2013-14), offered a

Michael Bauer: *Creme Wars-Snoopie*, 2014, oil on canvas, 88 by 127 inches; at Lisa Cooley.





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contrast to the paintings in terms of scale (each 22½ by 30 inches or vice versa) and palette (black ink on cream paper). Images that clearly pit one entity against another stand out: in *Baba vs Seger 8*, a constellation of shapes on the left (a UFO landing? an invasion of tents?) confronts the bottom half of a man on the right, encroaching threateningly onto his side of the sheet. Yet the conflict between American "heartland rock" icon Bob Seger and the mysterious Baba resists high-minded analysis. Rather, pop culture allusions flow through the series as detached signifiers, creating an absurdist stream of consciousness that ranges from familiar (if slightly off) references to nonsense.

Consider the exhibition title, "Creme Wars—Snoopie," selected because Bauer thought the words sounded funny together. One learned from the press release that "Snoopie" is the name of a skinhead who once beat up the artist in his native Germany. But American viewers were inevitably reminded of Snoopy, dynamic beagle of Peanuts fame, who could be considered a kind of backstage champion here, invoked only through the loaded coincidences typical of Bauer's work. The use of "creme" in each painting title in meaningless combinations—*Fleetwood Mac (Creme)*, *Sops-Bar (Anti-Creme)*—recalls the Dada Manifesto's word pileups, which leveled the importance of sound and meaning. As its author, Hugo Ball, explained: "It's a question of connections, and of loosening them up a bit to start with." Loosened from their cultural moorings, Bauer's depictions of hot dogs, cartoon pianos and sandwiches hover alongside abstract marks.

The press release declares Bauer an alternative to a trend of painters who "abandon composition in favor of casual gestures or endgame conceptual processes." Indeed, his lush vocabulary is a far cry from so-called Zombie Formalism. Instead of repeating a one-shot stunt to generate paintings in the model of mass production, he builds a complex visual language that follows the logic of a successful road trip: the right combination of planning and intuition. Each painting offers the freedom to chart one's own perceptual course, in which spontaneous detours and surprise encounters yield the best results.

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