

Everything Looks Like a Nail (To A Hammer)

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Pond Society is pleased to present *Everything Looks Like A Nail (To A Hammer)*, a solo exhibition of paintings by artist Emma Stern.

The late art critic Harold Rosenberg observed that it's important to remember the art world is a comedy. No one gets this better than painter Emma Stern. She knows who she is—both sides of the pros and cons aisle—and leverages her talent commensurately to her biography. You might see her at the studio donning a "my parents think I'm studying" t-shirt but that doesn't mean she's not in the permanent collection of the Rubell Museum in Miami. "I think my paintings could be considered funny because there is a self-awareness to them which makes them vulnerable," says Stern. "Sometimes when things are uncomfortable, they make us laugh. Discomfort can be hilarious."

Pirates on jet skis or cowgirls hitching down that lonely highway, Emma Stern takes her avatars on the road: Tough, sexy, and overflowing with presence. The compositions are intentionally over-the-top to the point of parody which aligns them more closely to the humor underneath. And don't mistake the prevalence of swords or chainsaws or nunchucks as condoning physical aggression. "I don't feel that my work is particularly violent," explains Stern. "There are a lot of weapons, but they always seem very flaccid to me, not dangerous. Maybe that is how I deal with the concept of violence, by making it totally impotent."

What does the future hold for us? We want our artists to be prophets. Whether it's Francis Picabia's transparencies reading as proto-Photoshop imagery or Warhol predicting our cultural obsession with fame or Richard Prince's "Gangs" as forerunner to a Google image results page, we like it when painters operate as fortune tellers, too. Albert Oehlen made computer painting in the early 1990s using Texas Instruments software, for example. Technology has always impacted creative output from camera shutter speeds to the advent of acrylic. Almost in reaction to Andy Warhol's silk-screening, Jean-Michel Basquiat embraced the novelty of color Xeroxes on his canvases as a form of serialization in the 1980s. More recently, the advancement of 3D rendering emerged as a means of drawing for many contemporary artists - Avery Singer, and Mike Lee - which Emma Stern adeptly harnesses to her pictorial advantage. "I use software that's mostly for game developers to do character design," explains Stern. "It also gets used a lot by the erotica community." After graduating from Pratt in 2014, Emma found herself without an abundance of figure models and opted to invent her own, which in turn led to an entire universe creation. Her "materials" she likened to digital lava, hence her Instagram handle @lavababy. "Anyone on social media is promoting an avatar of themselves already," she theorizes "a hyper-curated virtual self. If we're all doing that now anyway, might as well make it art, right?"

Often people will comment to Emma Stern about the provocative nature of her subject matter which she finds intriguing given there's practically no nudity in her paintings whatsoever. "I've always said the avatars I create are a form of extended non-literal self-portraiture so if there's images of a teen-age girl, it's a stand-in for me at that age," says Stern. "I have those memories and carry those experiences with me and sometimes I make art about it. I never imagined that would be problematic. There's a part of me that still feels like a vulnerable sixteen-year-old, but then there is another part of me that feels like a hot centaur girl."

With Apple releasing their Vision Pro goggles in 2024, we stand on the precipice of new speculative non-fiction. The headset may likely alter our perceptions of reality, leveling the playing field between what constitutes the natural world versus the manmade. Perhaps the paintings of Emma Stern can provide us just a glimpse over the horizon of what's ahead as the 21st century advances.

Author: Bill Powers. He is the owner of Half Gallery. He has also curated group shows for Gagosian, Blum & Poe, and Almine Rech Gallery. Powers' writing has appeared in The New York Times, ARTnews, The Wall Street Journal, and Vanity Fair.