

Ameri- canicity's Paintings

Orion Martin
at Favorite Goods

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A Google image search for “Barbara Rossi” reveals fifty years of the artist’s work alongside glamour shots of a lingerie-clad Babi Rossi, a Brazilian model (with a much longer Wikipedia page). “I feel like I’ve gone through my life on my eyeballs,” the artist Rossi recently told Leslie Buchbinder¹—a summary, if there ever was one, of that split-screen fatigue and image-happy psychosis brewed in the special alchemy of American culture (read: google-y eye emoji).

The wide-eyed Chicago Imagists didn’t just collage, as Google does. Those virtuosic dilettantes fused aesthetic universes with the kind of exuberance art history longs to forget. It’s no surprise that the best Imagists often illustrated processes of weaving, binding, and puncturing. Rossi’s *Navigation* series depicts knots in various states of constriction alongside abstracted bodily forms suspended by bits of string. She often split her canvases in two, connecting the different halves with a carefully-drawn leash, or by shooting through a plane with painted-on, pin-point perforations, as

if the other image longed to break through. More literally, in his zany, chromatic oils, Art Green would fuse representation and abstraction with bits of tape, shoelaces, or chain-link fencing rendered in paint.

Perhaps it’s no surprise that representations of tying and binding emerged in *Shorb St.*, Orion Martin’s perversely thrilling solo show at Favorite Goods, where the Imagists’ penchant for surrealism and kink was also on conspicuous display. In the contemporary climate of drab, iterative painting, Martin’s oils please by virtue of being distinct from one another; it just so happens they are equally appealing at being themselves. In *Skirt (American Don)* (all works 2015), the cartoon geometry of a lily is edged out of a gauzy, pastel, almost impressionist field. The lily is evenly perforated from stem to petals, and one of its leaves looks quite like a hot dog. In *Strawberry*, a centaur with an exceedingly hard cock is figured blowing a shofar, seemingly affixed to a strawberry—as if with strawberry’s own seeds—and the centaur, the strawberry, the whole canvas, and its frame are totalized in a Driscols™ red. Martin smears Imagist tastes and techniques into a broader vocabulary, in which wild figuration, an unruly sense of color, and forays into decorative kitsch appear so quintessentially and excessively American I feel downright patriotic to celebrate them.

Either football or corset laces thread together a leaf in *Career in Magic*, where one flower’s bud is replaced by its concrete architectural double: the fleur-de-lis. Two of the flowers are wearing collars on their necks, leashed at right angles off

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the frame. Traced onto a coral plane, most of the forms are rendered behind an irregular orange grid, as if we're seeing through an engraved window—though one leaf, speckled with spherical dew drops, breaks into the primary plane. Even the grid won't stay itself: in the left corner, the orange gives way into the same green gradient that colors the leaves, an exquisite, hallucinogenic detail.

In other, mixed-media works, Martin made literal the window figured in *Career in Magic's* oils. *Stained Glass* is actually a leaded window, set into an interior gallery wall. Light shone through the thick, raised outline of what could be Athena's lower half: her wing attached to a muscular thigh, her foot in a '50s pump. In both *Son of a Hairdresser* and *Louver*, a photograph of a young woman's face—one seemingly covered in Baby Oil, both rendered in almost cruelly high definition—is encased in glass etched like a diner booth separator. One plane is patterned like the flowers in *Skirt* and *Career in Magic*, the other with cheesy, diamond-shaped dots. The frames of these two photographs also vie for attention. Enameled, enormous, and apparently hand-carved, their bulbous forms and Easter palate add a Memphis furniture flourish to the already suffused aesthetic field.

To look at these works is to live through on your eyeballs. They reward lingers and roves. They overwhelm. Yet Martin's ingenious use of decorative glass, playfully '80s colors, or fetishy florals offers an earnest optical anthropology. Ultimately, the works seem to offer us a sense of wonder at the aesthetic accomplishments of a now-aging generation, retiring modestly to Florida and taking their Vegas-informed sense of fun with them. This kind of middle class excess is an utterly American invention, ornamented and celebratory, with a few

notes of *foreign*. Sometimes America is the becoming-shitty of elsewhere. Then, it is the becoming-glorious of the shitiness of here. It hallucinates home at diners and fast food restaurants. It longs to vacation, if vacation means a cruise and a cruise means to navel-gaze as your stomach expands. It collects tchotchkes from all of its travels within its bubble. Its maximalism borders on hoarding (but everything was so reasonably priced!). It clips coupons. It surfs channels. It has taste. Good taste. It wants to sway in festive environs to family-friendly trends. It wants to learn how to squirt. It wants a pool on the beach. It wants little paper fans on every drink. "Here we have an advertisement," Barthes began his classic text on Italianicity. And here, we have Americanicity's paintings.

1

Orion Martin, *Strawberry* (2015), oil on canvas, 21 × 17 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Favorite Goods.

2

Orion Martin, *Career in Magic* (2015), oil on canvas, 51 × 35 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Favorite Goods.