

Sandra Meigs
The *Bump* and *Ride* Paintings

Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto
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I do not want to use the word 'strange' when describing Meigs' work; it would diminish its impact. Nor would the word 'childish' do justice to its complexities (though 'hallucinogenic' might fit). The formal qualities of these paintings directly relate to, and even define, their content. Silhouettes of surreal clowns, monsters, animals, and children are borne of the forms outlined in white gesso like clouds yielding shapes. These figures are emphasized by colour, flat and vibrant as Matisse cut outs. The lines are so unpredictable and the forms so startling that it is as if the artist's hand were guided while painting by the very creatures she depicts.

It's almost as if these apparitions fell into a bucket of paint, and are now roaming the gallery like zombies. One painting, *Ride. Girl Rubbing Noses with Mouse. Indigo*, depicts a girl 'Eskimo-kissing' a sort of avian rat. Each has an animal perched on top or growing out of its head. In the white negative space between the animals, the artist has dug a woman's face and body into the gesso. All the paintings in the *Ride* series have fantastic negative space renderings, some more figurative than others. In the exquisite, *Ride. Girl Kissing Horse. Pale Green*, one can find a foot in the space between the girl's head and her buoyant ponytail; between the Pluto-ish horse's ears is an upside-down head with a penis under his mouth; beneath the girl's chin is a folded woman's body laying on her back with knees bent.

The *Bump* series, which Meigs worked on during a residency in New York, at first seem similar to the later *Ride* series, but there are important differences. The *Bump* paintings depict confrontations between children and monsters (one on either side of the canvas), while the *Ride* series is less dichotomous, presenting one figure that is alone or interacting with animals. Titles of the *Bump* series indicate colour (e.g. *Bump.green*), while *Ride*'s titles tell also of their narrative content (e.g. *Ride. Clown with Bent Head. Green.*). The background shapes in gesso appear only in the later *Ride* series, which indicate a move towards layering and complexity.

Over the years, Meigs' painting has progressed to canvas from installations that were as much about scenic backdrop painting as they were about drawing and sculpture, graphics and text (e.g. *The Western Gothic* and *The Room of 1,000 Paintings*). In all of the current work there is an opposition of the layers of meaning and paint to the flatness of the forms and simplicity of composition. In her artist's statement Meigs acknowledges, "The form of the work fights its content and the content battles within itself. Recognition oscillates between the mass, the form, and the narrative content of the work." The paint *is* the form; the drips and the flatness of the paint create these figures. The physical properties of the paint on its canvas are integrated into the subject. I cannot help but think of these works as self-portraits, especially the earlier *Bump* series. Aren't we all part child/part monster struggling to fill the gap between?

-Chen Tamir