

## **Return to the Rainbow Forest**

by Sura Wood



"Strange Machine" (2015), oil on linen over panel by John Bankston. Photo: John Janca, Courtesy of Rena Bransten Projects

A spinner of tales, a visual novelist, a dream weaver, John Bankston is a San Francisco-based, gay African-American artist who, like the characters in his adventures, prefers not to be pigeonholed by race or sexual orientation. His work often bends pop-culture icons – pirates, cowboys, magicians – that tend to be white and straight, opening the door to fantasy and imagination, realms the artist believes are largely closed off for African-Americans. His figures are black men who have departed a place that has stymied and labeled them for another where they can determine their identity and destiny through performance dress or costumes. *The Explorer*, a new show of his whimsical paintings and drawings at Rena Bransten Projects, continues the ongoing saga of the Rainbow Forest, a land in which a man – perhaps Bankston's alter ego – can become the avatar of his dreams.

In the story's latest chapters, mechanical birds accompany him on his journey, he encounters strange diminutive men in animal masks who initially welcome him before taking him captive, and a robot creature called an Abstracticator, inspired by Bankston's visit to an abandoned blast furnace in the Deep South, may or may not hold the key to his emancipation. Though his work is playful with the hues and childlike simplicity of a coloring book, and a gentle humor that's disarming, the subtext hints at shifting racial and sexual identities. (*May 21-July 3*)