



Artwork with a conceptual bent, that functions as a kind of intellectual puzzle, so predominates today that the figurative work of San Francisco artist John Bankston comes as a delightful shock. The economical, informed contour draftsmanship suggests the classical tradition; the bright palette and floating color suggest the liberations of Parisian modernism; and the coloring book format smacks of American Pop Art at its most open and democratic, celebrating the vitality of the burgeoning Sixties media world. What's unusual in these works is their cheerful acceptance of what we still term alternative lifestyles, in contradistinction to the justifiably angry or serious identity art of the 1980s. The protagonists in these paintings, drawing, prints, and (coming next year) ceramic sculptures, are gay black men, fancifully costumed as pirate, biker, cowboy, *lucha libre* wrestler, bearded lady or as some exotic but benign hybrid of animal and human—birdman, leopardman, bearman. They're seen engaged in enigmatic, innocent, nonsensical (and nonsexual) narratives in some bucolic tropical fantasyland like J.M. Barrie's NeverNeverLand, or Maurice Sendak's island of Wild Things. Bankston, a Michigan native who moved west after getting his MFA in painting at the

"AT THE BEACH"
2009
ACRYLIC ON PANEL, 12" x 9"
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY



Art Institute of Chicago, enjoys San Francisco's tolerance for the zesty and the goofy, and finds it relevant to his work, which explores identity and persona with a light, lyrical touch. One curator described the paintings as "space[s] of inventive play" filled with "symbolic encounters that represent ... [the artist's] unconscious." The viewer's unconscious is also galvanized. Explains the artist: "Because the work suggests a narrative and because the narrative jumps, the viewer has to fill in the gaps and enter the character's shoes and think things they might not necessarily think or might even be uncomfortable thinking about. It's like stepping into the shoes of an 'other.'"

Apparently a number of people like those shoes. Bankston, now in his mid-forties (although he appears younger) has been awarded Ford Foundation, Art Council and Joan Mitchell Foundation grants; a Fleishacker Eureka Fellowship; and a Louis Comfort Tiffany and Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art award. Nevertheless, interviewed at his large Hunters Point studio while preparing for his upcoming "Circus in the Woods" show, he confesses to having had a hard time creatively during the past year: "Painting wasn't something I was looking forward to doing. I was working on my drawings, working in my sketchbook, and then I got this opportunity to make these [ceramic] sculptures, so that was really inspirational."

Following the lead of one of his Chicago teachers, who found inspiration in African and folk/outside art, Bankston began drawing and painting the artifacts collected around his studio, e.g., colonial-era spirit figures from Ghana or magical *ibéji* twin figurines from Nigeria, instinctively, without preplanning, trying to catch their essence: "These objects are full of meaning and full of history and their own mythology and in a way it's how we come to know another culture, through its objects and artifacts." He combines the artifacts with objects seen elsewhere and with images from his dreams, without any overarching scheme or narrative: "They're sort of like daydreams and so if I were to stop and think about it, I would probably not be able to continue. I don't know if they really make sense. They don't come from a place that is about telling a logical story... I like art that you can enter wherever you're comfortable. You don't have to know everything, but there's the color, or some entry point, something to bring you in, and at some point maybe you discover the different layers."

—DEWITT CHENG

John Bankston will be showing new work at the Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco from January 14 – February 27. His work is also on display at the Studio Museum in Harlem's group show "A Delicate Touch," and in the Rubell Family Collection's traveling exhibition, "30 Americans."