

Shay Kun

Exfoliations

BENRIMON
CONTEMPORARY

www.bcontemporary.com

514 West 24th Street, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10011

telephone: 212 924 2400

facsimile: 212 659 0054

electronic: info@bcontemporary.com

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September 25th - October 30th, 2010

Design: Joseph Sturges

Essay: Dustin Adam Stein

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Essay by
Dustin Adam Stein

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Shay Kun is that rare artist that both inspires and challenges our understanding of contemporary art. He displays a compelling command of colors and the seemingly incongruous use of found objects. His refined skill and grace demonstrate his mastery with paint while also referencing art history and his time studying and revering the Hudson River School painters.

Benrimon Contemporary proudly presents Kun's new series of paintings. The exhibition must be taken in as a whole; the paradigm is greater than the individual pieces. The recurring theme is not just idealized, pastoral landscapes subject to vivid object intervention but the aesthetics and form of the objects, and the overall design of seeing the many paintings together. The exhibit allows the viewer to see the totality of Shay Kun's vision. The synthesis of numerous compositions coming together on one canvas promotes a romantic idealization. Each individual work is magnificent but together they create a cohesive body that highlights the importance of color, form, and texture. In this exhibit, the artist strips away the exterior of paintings. He wants to re-invent the landscape, not in a simpler way as in reducing colors or lines objects, but in the sense that he is reaching deeper into his own consciousness and creating landscapes from the recesses of his mind as he collects and organizes images.

The pristine environments in the paintings are interrupted by disconnected objects. Serene mountains and the lakes reflecting them also have jeeps running over boulders in the foreground and fires burning in the background. Is this a reflection of the degradation of natural environments by human encroachment? Is the scenery just a way to explore the rods and cones of our eyes to as much vivid color as they can handle? Or is there something even deeper about the mismatched subjects?

In this newest series of paintings from 2010, he has inversed the relationship between natural and artificial. In one painting, "Armed and Dangerous" he has a well painted, textured hot air balloon dominating the middle of the canvas with a classical landscape warped as if looking in a fun house mirror or traveling in a time machine. There is no time/space continuum in the background but the foreground remains anchored in the literal world of the hot air balloon. As we drift into the atmosphere would the earth look warped? The painting also references the paradigm shift brought about by Columbus and other explorers that the earth is actually round, not flat. But as we dig deeper into the archeology of knowledge, to borrow a phrase from post-modernity, we realize that Ptolemy the Greek geographer and mathematician of 150 C.E. amassed knowledge from the Alexandria library that the earth was in fact spherical. This knowledge came to be

lost and in medieval times people thought the world was flat again. How did something that is a universal truth come to be lost during history? This painting may describe the intellectual thought of when humans rediscovered the earth was flat. If they had risen in a hot air balloon high enough and looked down, they may have believed that the earth looked like one of the quadrants of this painting. This relativity towards knowledge and time fashions Kun's paintings. There are no absolute answers or truths. They are all just theories, some of which are better than others.

The hot air balloon appears a number of times in these new paintings, not only because they display a wealth of color on a small portion of the canvas, but also because they hold deep symbolic meaning. Shay is afraid of heights so he is repelled by such an object, yet the colors are so inviting. The balloons simultaneously attract and repel him. In his mind they are part of the stream of consciousness of images that he constantly sees. There is no absolute beauty in Kun's mind, just shades of grey.

In "Now More than Ever" we see a balloon half submerged in a lake. The lakes and trees set the scene for an idealized façade, but they are interrupted by this balloon, a parked dilapidated car with its hood open next to the lake and a variety of animals. The car is not flotsam, because we see no rust or indication that it has been submerged and rescued. Instead it appears abandoned, much like the balloon. A pastoral landscape is challenged by misplaced objects. The colors are bold and images figurative. Will these objects be the legacy of humans? After the last human has died and all we have created remains will the earth heal itself? Formerly polluted lakes can be self-cleansed of bacteria and disintegrate small objects but large artificial objects like balloons and cars will remain.

Kun is meticulous in painting the natural scenes and pays as much attention to the intervening objects. The tires of the jeep have treads; the figures are rich with camouflage and the fire in the background contains the vivid oranges, light red and yellow of a bonfire. The images are saturated and the texture is rich. Man intervenes in nature and leaves its mark as it comes and goes; the painter begins with an empty canvas and shapes it in his image. When one sees Kun's painting they may think of Aldo Leopold's line, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." We are one with the environment but no matter how untouched we make our trails we still leave something behind. This is an inferior message in Shay's painting. As the human population continues to propagate we must ask ourselves whether any piece of land is

really untouched. Shay takes this question and answers it: the world is interconnected; our actions reverberate in our environment. While we may think that we have little impact on our surroundings by reducing our carbon footprint we know the damage has already been done. The environment has been exposed to human interaction. But is this a negative thing?

In "How to lose Friends and Alienate People" two young adults relax on recliners. One with his legs propped up but there is no footrest or ottoman. The woman to his right looks eagerly at him, awaiting his words. He is not aloof, but he is not engaged. He looks over at her, his mind pregnant with thought. Things sometimes are better left unsaid. Between two acquainted individuals, a face connotes meaning. The creases in one's nose, the glint in one's eye, depending on the individual could be boredom or fear, but the underlying image remains and Kun wants us to remember it. He wants to invoke the beauty of color; the important of aesthetics and the way our brain processes the millions of images we see on a daily basis.

Kun is a product of his upbringing. Raised and educated in Israel under parents who both painted landscapes, though almost polar opposite in genre. Kun comments that growing up in Israel, the Holocaust is ubiquitous, even in the minds of Israeli artists. Then when living in Europe he realized that the history there is different and the art has evolved over centuries. His father is known for dystopian landscapes. The almost apocalyptic scenery reflects his disappointment with humanity in the wake of the Holocaust. His work is not defined by the Shoah, but is informed by it. When I asked Shay if his father agreed with Adorno's famous statement, "there is no art after the Holocaust,"¹ Shay responded "Not really. He took more of a fatalist approach." Shay's interpretation is that man has wrought destruction on the earth but that does not mean that art cannot be beautiful. Shay's mother paints beautiful, utopian landscapes. These two disparaging approaches to landscape fomented Shay's unique style. While his paintings have an overwhelming sense of morbidity to them, they also lay out promise.

In conversation he called himself an "art gypsy," a metaphor that is apropos on a number of levels. Kun melds the contemporary world of hyper colorized canvases with the serene landscapes of the early American painters in both the Hudson River School and the Old West of California and Nevada with the tradition of European paintings and textures of Impressionism and other related movements. In his contemporary mindset, he is capturing images as life is going on and placing them in his paintings. One can see the ubiquitous three dimensional screensaver icons in a number of his works. While many

¹ In one of the most quoted phrases of the twentieth century, Theodore Adorno actually wrote, "To write poetry after the Holocaust is barbaric," has been reinterpreted in many forms.

of us equate the symbol with mornings when we awaken our computer from sleep or at night when we put it to sleep, Shay sees an image ripe for exploration.

Kun's paintings have evolved over the last decade. When he first began landscape paintings they were smaller and more subtle. The interrupting objects less invasive. But that vision of a fabricated, amalgamated landscape was always there on the canvas. The trees, fauna and flora picked and plucked from experiences, memories, clippings, and magazines he scoured. Additional elements are borrowed from a thrift-shop painting he had seen in his travels, but Shay takes these disparate objects to the next level. His paintings combine all these elements, fusing them into a sensory overload of paint dye, forms and surface. The landscapes of Europe and California have already been painted to no end, so Shay twists them in a contemporary way. He highlights the kitsch in them and adds his own audacious persona. But these found images are universal. Walk into a mall or used clothing store and the same repetitive landscapes can be seen almost anywhere or at least variations of it. What does this say about our consumption of images? Shay is taking these overused images that are processed, and almost devoid of beauty, from excessive exposure and transforms them into something different. They become artificial compositions that overwhelm our senses.

Shay Kun is an Israeli-born New York-based artist. He earned his B.F.A. at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, and went on to earn his M.F.A. from Goldsmiths College in London, England. Notable and upcoming exhibitions include "Animamix," The Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum, China (2009) and "The Law of the Jungle," Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York (2010).

-Dustin Adam Stein

Exfoliations



A Wrinkle in Time, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
40 x 80 in. (101.6 x 203.2 cm)



The Curious Incident, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
20 x 30 in. (50.8 x 76.2 cm)



The Intuitionist, 2010
Oil on canvas
72 x 48 in. (182.88 x 121.92 cm)



Now More Than Ever, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
38 x 24 in. (96.52 x 60.96 cm)



Wallflowers, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
38 x 50 in. (96.52 x 127 cm)



Liquid Swords, 2010
Oil on canvas
20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 60.96 cm)



How to Lose Friends & Alienate People, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
60 x 45 in. (152.4 x 114.3 cm)



Engulfed in Flames, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
110 x 36 in. (279.4 x 91.44 cm)



Exfoliation, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
72 x 48 in. (182.88 x 121.92 cm)



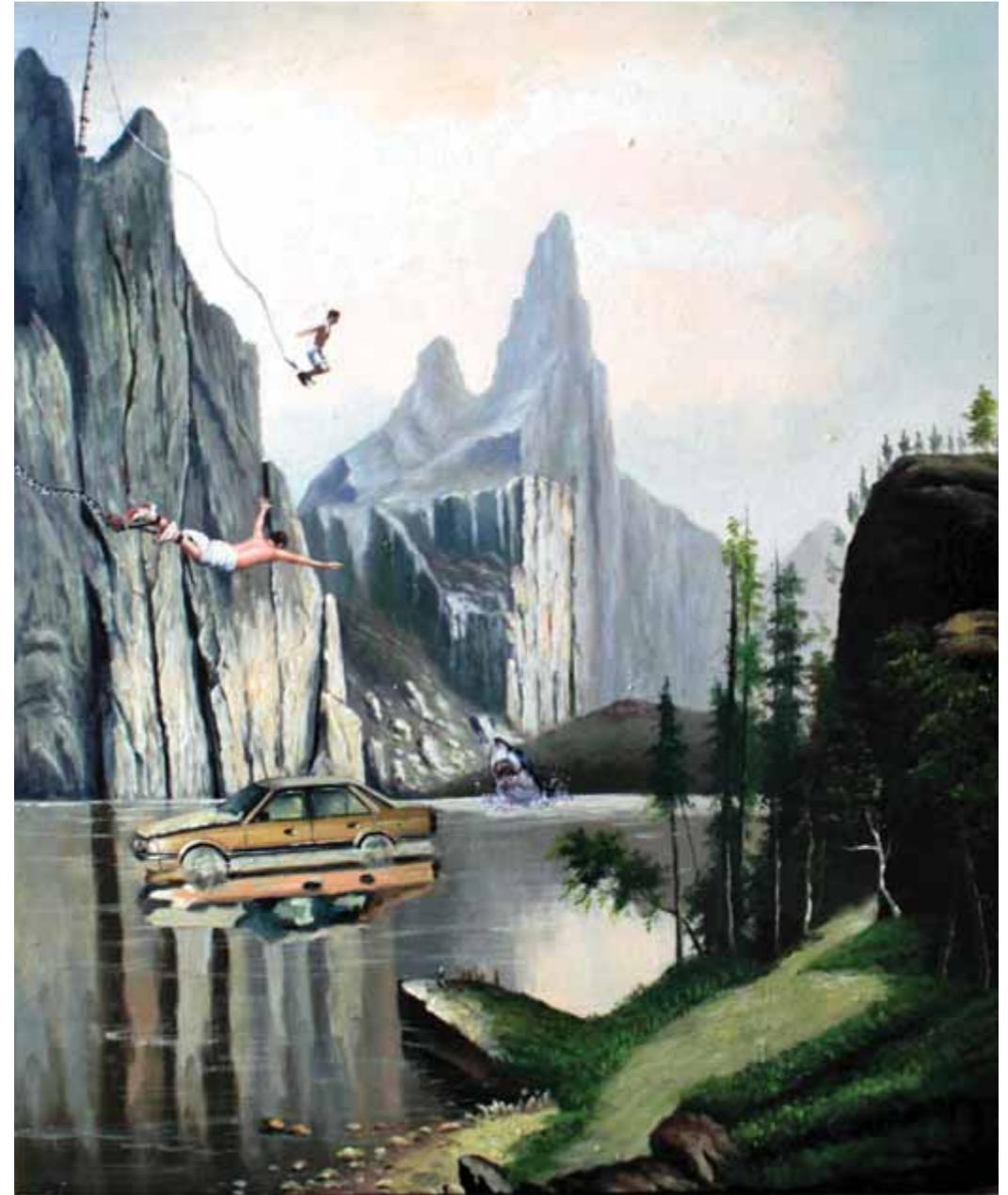
Neverwhere, 2010
Oil and acrylic on canvas
48 x 96 in. (121.92 x 243.84 cm)



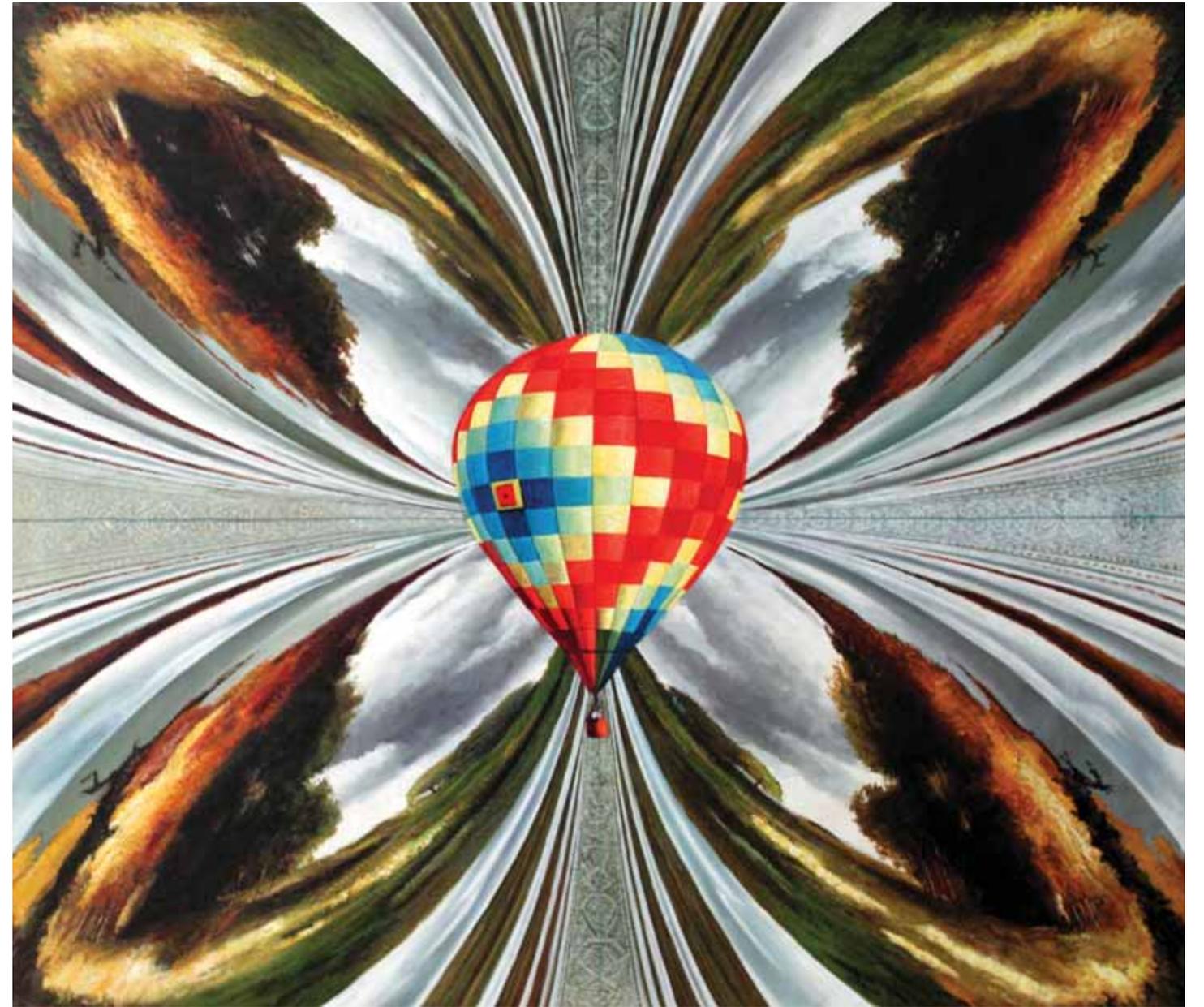
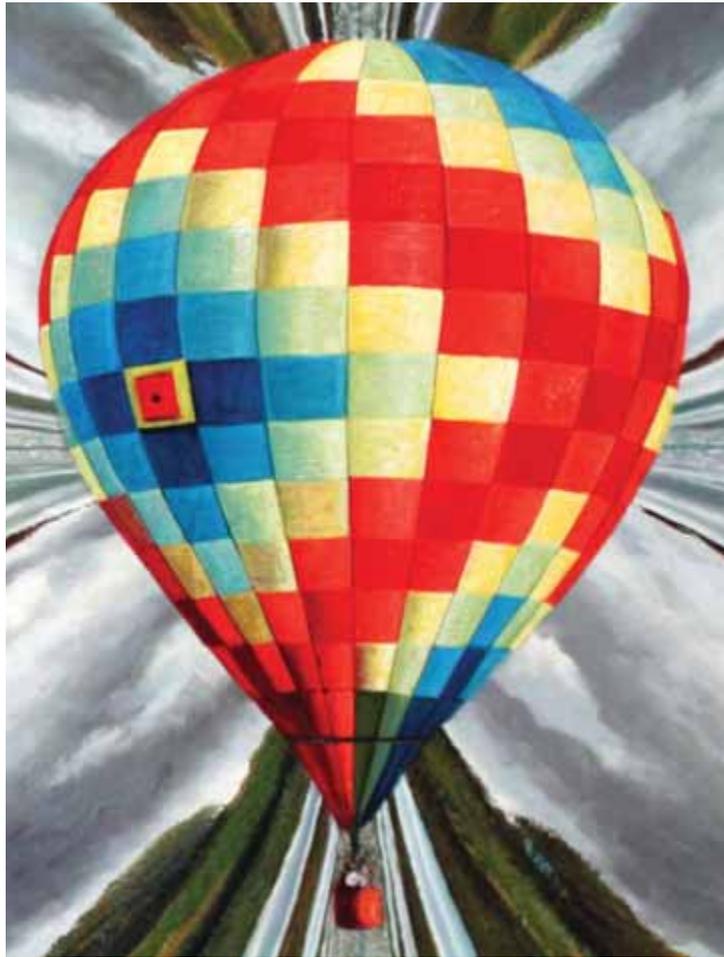
Hypnosis, 2010
Oil on canvas
40 x 80 in. (101.6 x 203.2 cm)



Things Fall Apart, 2010
Oil on canvas
60 x 50 in. (152.4 x 127 cm)



Death is a Lonely Business, 2010
Oil on canvas
20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 60.96 cm)



Armed and Dangerous, 2010
Oil on canvas
65 x 55 in. (165.1 x 139.7 cm)



The Hills Have Eyes, 2010
Oil on canvas
36 x 48 in. (91.44 x 121.92 cm)



Assassination Vacation, 2010
Oil on canvas
12 x 16 in. (30.48 x 40.64 cm)



Be Yourself, Everyone Else is Already Taken, 2010
Oil on canvas
72 x 48 in. (182.88 x 121.92 cm)

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