

INKA ESSENHIGH

GRADY T. TURNER

LAST SPRING I SAW Inka Essenhigh's large enamel paintings in a group show, and for weeks they stayed in my mind like a pop song gone weirdly awry. Against flat fields of acid yellows or greens, Essenhigh painted figures that seemed to be mutating before your eyes. One painting depicted what might have been an orgy or a mass suicide, with knotted red clothes bleeding putty-colored flesh into nude puddles. Morphing from one indistinct form to another, Essenhigh's figures could not be pinned down.

In a solo show soon afterwards, the paintings seemed to revisit the ancient battle for sexual supremacy, but it was hard to say anything with certainty about such grotesque vignettes. Essenhigh might paint

a beauty contest of decapitated amputees derived from the Nike of Samothrace, or sentence limbless women to the drudgery of nursing, but patriarchal malfeasance is not her subject — or, at least not her only subject.

from a tidal wave, storm, or hurricane. Whatever — the menace is generalized. It's awful, but kind of comical too. I don't mean to say there is no violence, but if I do take away an arm or a head, it's not that I'm trying to make a headless person so much as a more interest-

Her paintings seem to revisit the ancient battle for sexual supremacy.

Essenhigh hesitates to attribute specific meanings to her work, but admits she tells stories to herself that give narrative unity to each series of paintings. In the end, the stories may be undetectable, hidden like the countless sketches and erasures underneath the smooth enamel surfaces. Paintings in her most recent solo exhibition depicted familiar apocalyptic cataclysms, such as flood, fire, and war; in one, a virgin was sacrificed to a volcano. She notes that most viewers pick up on recurring themes like authority, bondage and warfare, though she is surprised that people find her imagery violent.

"This one isn't particularly violent," Essenhigh said, indicating a painting in which a massive plastic-looking wave threatens to engulf refugees. "These are people escaping

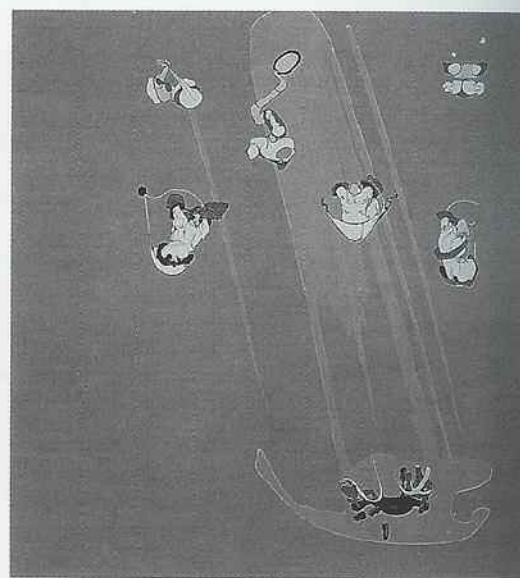
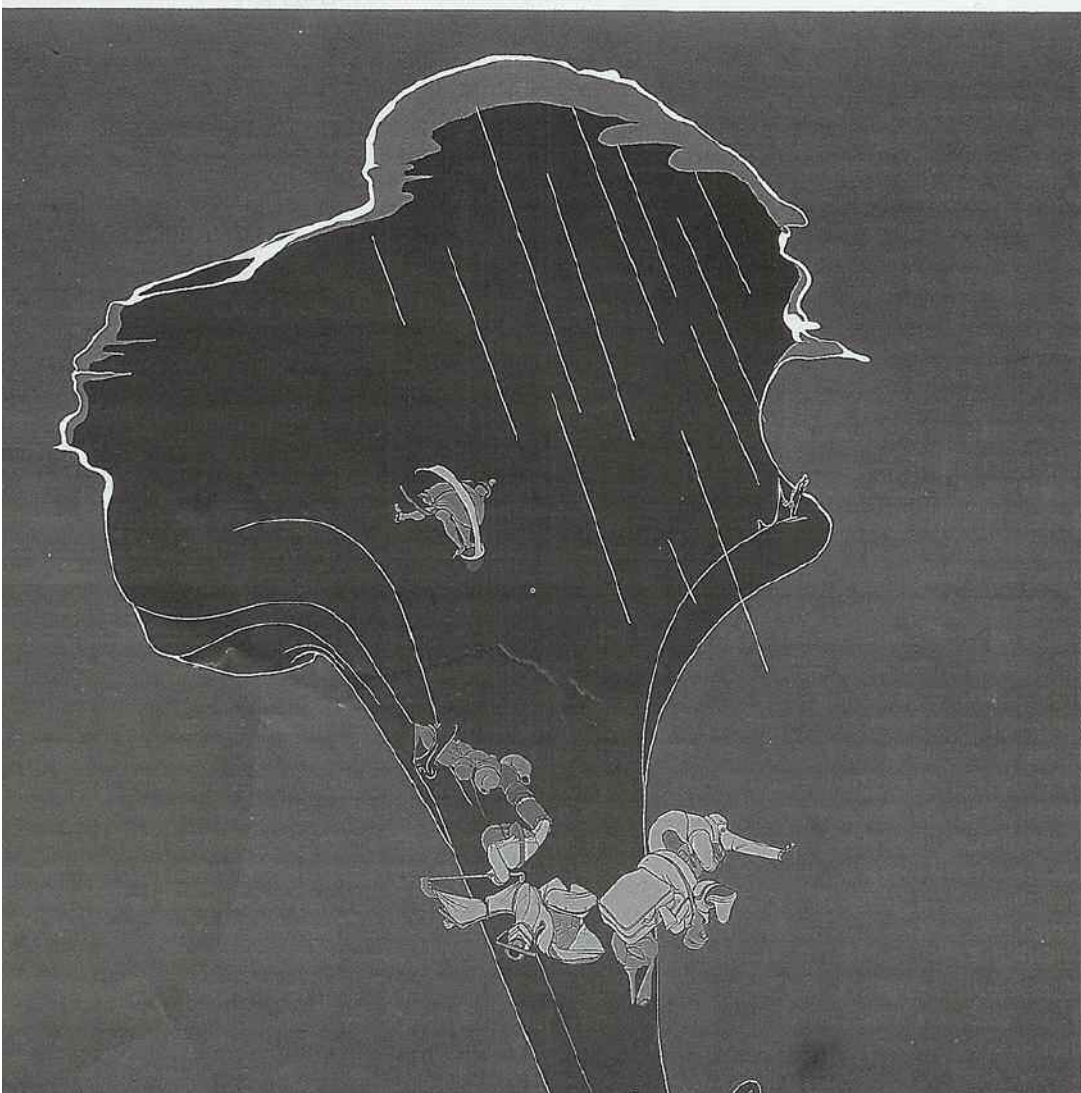
ing shape — you don't need the rest." Essenhigh's icky colors are influenced, she says, by the interiors of institutional buildings like schools and hospitals. Though the colors can be repellent, Essenhigh says she wants her paintings to be elegant. This tension between repulsion and attraction also informs her subjects. "I think about them as being about America: fake, fun, pop, violent, but also quite attractive."

Grady T. Turner is a critic based in New York.

Inka Essenhigh was born in 1969.

Solo shows: 1998: Stefan Stux, New York; 1999: Deitch Projects, New York.

Group shows: 1996: "Night of 1000 Drawings," Artists Space, New York; 1997: "Girls! Girls! Girls!," Grand Salon, New York; 1998: "Pop Surrealism," The Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield (CT); "Anatomy/Intellect," Stefanelli, New York.



Left: *Deluge*, 1998; above: *Ozone Hole*, 1998.
Both images: oil enamel on canvas, 72 x 72 inches.
Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.