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“She has evolved her own distinctive realm of highbrow cartooning.”

Inka Essenhigh, Artist A Painter With Pop

In a notoriously jealous art world, where no good deed goes unpunished, the painter Inka Essenhigh enjoyed, then suffered, the inevitable consequences of sudden fame a few years ago, when she was pegged a stylish up-and-comer by the press and her photogenic face was splashed on the pages of glossy magazines. (One article was titled “Mod Squad.”) The art she made was a surreal riff on Jap-animation, although she didn’t think of it that way at the time: skillfully drawn, sinuous and decorative, her paintings were populated by humanoid techno-blobs that looked slightly sinister but also loopy. The touch was mechanical, the atmosphere airless. “Trendy,” critics barked, while gossips charted her commercial passage from one heavyweight New York dealer to another.

Now a world-weary 33, lately married, a restless but friendly live wire, Essenhigh is starting a fresh phase in her still youthful career with simultaneous shows, of new work at the 303 Gallery in Manhattan and a three-year survey at Victoria Miro in London. She has switched from using enamels to oils, replacing the no-touch touch with more explicit brushwork. Images now explode into depth and tell goofy, romantic stories. Essenhigh, it turns out, has evolved her own distinctive realm of highbrow cartooning in a kinky style that is lush and louche. A long-lashed vixen in delicate pink-striped harem pants, fanned by buglike slaves, reclines on a gigantic upholstered platform shaped like a tiered wedding cake. Lovers shoot laser beams into one another’s eyes while morphing into Art Nouveau entanglements of vines and budding flowers.

Born in Pennsylvania, schooled in Columbus, Ohio, and New York, Essenhigh tried on various painterly guises, realist and abstract, before settling on a style of her own. She finally found inspiration, as young artists typically do, where others were saying not to look. This included *démodé* artists like Dali. Her taste for them dovetailed, indirectly, with a stint during which she designed boxer shorts for a low-end fabric-licensing company, drawing football players and aliens on tight overnight deadlines. The results were more interesting than anything she was doing in the studio.

So she began inventing hybrid creatures to paint in wallpaperlike patterns, adopting enamels, which suited her natural fluency as a draftsman and left a flat, glossy surface — “the look of being computer-made in that cheap early computer-graphic style,” is how she has put it. Then, fearing a rut, she realized this summer that she had to change gears. The images still evolve straight on the canvas, during the painting process. But now there is a richer, tactile surface that suggests more virtuosic explorations to come.

Flirting brazenly with kitsch, Essenhigh’s art tests the always fine, fascinating line between beauty and bad taste. In so doing, it seems to be emblematic painting for these uneasy times. **By Michael Kimmelman**

