

entering the labyrinth

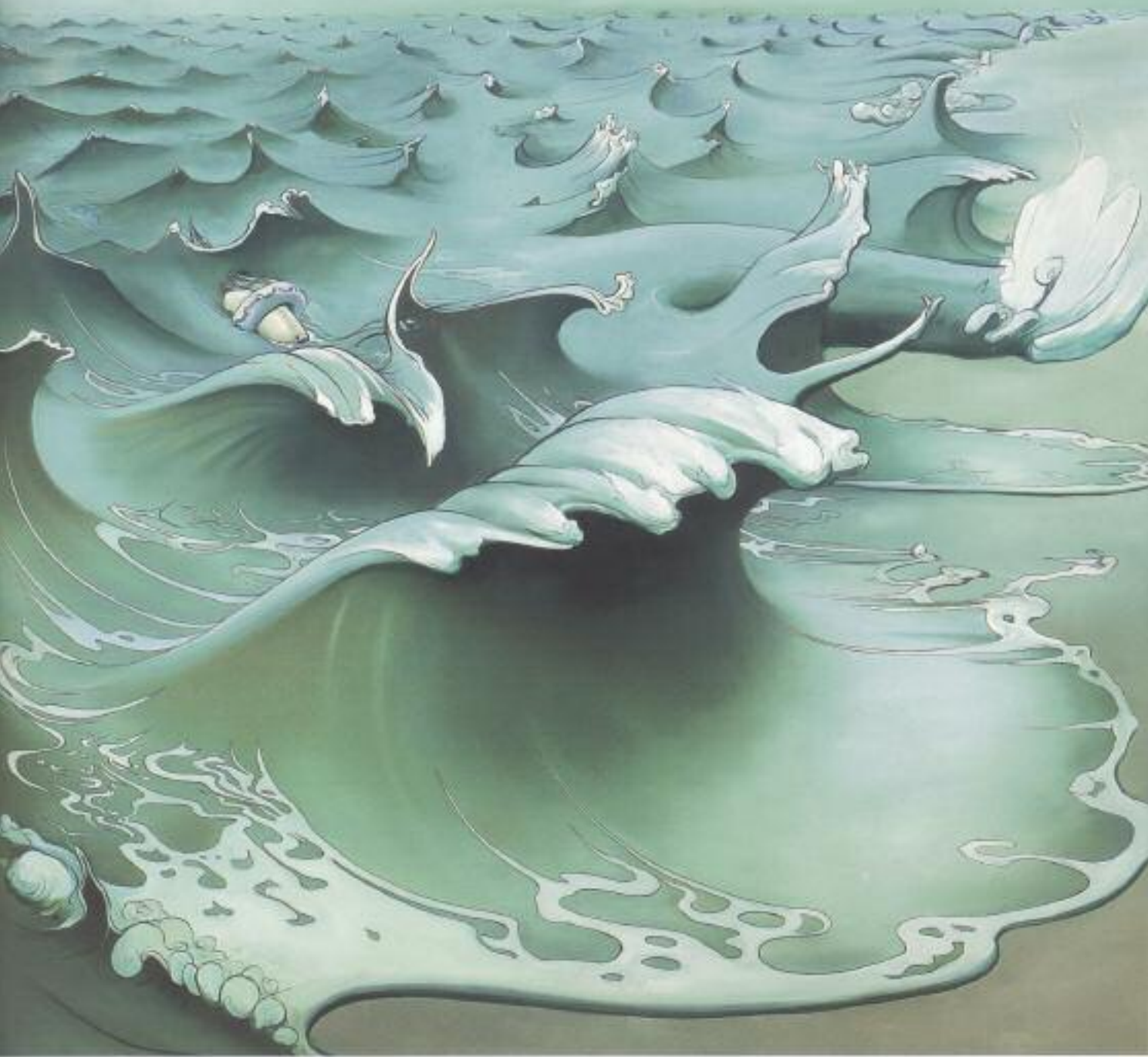
darry schwabsky

Following the thread of Inka Essenhigh's investigation of mythology, mass culture, and metaphor.



I don't know Inka Essenhigh personally, but there was always something that scared me a bit in the idea of her I drew from looking at the paintings. Not anymore. Her work has become riskier, or risky in a different way. She comes off as less sure of herself, more awkward and self-questioning. I'll admit I like sensing that vulnerability. Does that make me cruel? The paintings themselves, so immersed in questions about the relation between pleasure and cruelty, seem to

whisper that question in my ear. They whisper an answer too: "You're too innocent to be cruel," they assure. "But just follow us, we know so much more about it than you do." I was ready to believe in the knowingness of Essenhigh's earlier work but now I don't think so. These new paintings still know an awful lot—they are still the work of a prodigy, though one who's now all of thirty-three years old—but they also make it clear that she is on a learning curve like anyone else.



▲ Inka Essenhigh *Gray Wave*, 2012, oil on panel, 118 x 188 cm. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

▲ Inka Essenhigh *WWF*, 2012, oil on canvas, 182.8 x 203 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

Now the thrill of the work seems to reside less in how far she's already gone than in how far she might be able to go—if she can hold on to her thread. The most obvious sign of the change in Essenhigh's work is a shift in her choice of materials. Until recently, she was primarily painting in enamel, but now she's working with oil paint. You might call it going forward by working back—from a cold, artificial, relatively non-aesthetic and therefore implicitly

contemporary medium to one that is inherently warmer, more organic, and reeks of tradition, thereby risking a fall into banality. Seeing an early painting like *Yellow Turkeys* (1998) shown along with new work in her recent exhibitions was a good reminder of just how drastic the change has been. Painted in a flat, airless, opaque manner, the artist used a bold, graphically linear style to define mostly large, always unreflected color areas to give the painting an almost



Matissean sense of decorativeness at intriguing odds with its bizarre subject matter. Although this early work feels spare and almost raw in the context of Essenhigh's much lusher new paintings, and while it is relatively small compared to what she is doing now, its internal scale is rather grand. Despite the nearly absolute lack of depth in any traditional sense, the painting feels quite spacious. The exhibition in London, selected from Essenhigh's work of the past two years, showed

the transition in process and indicated that her change of medium was not the cause but rather the result of a development in her concept of pictorial space. In the paintings dated 2001, such as *White Rain*, in which the artist was still using enamel, she was already reaching for a space of greater plasticity. Here Essenhigh's mutant figures no longer play out their aberrant rituals within a hard, flat monochromatic surround like the one in *Yellow Turkey*—now the

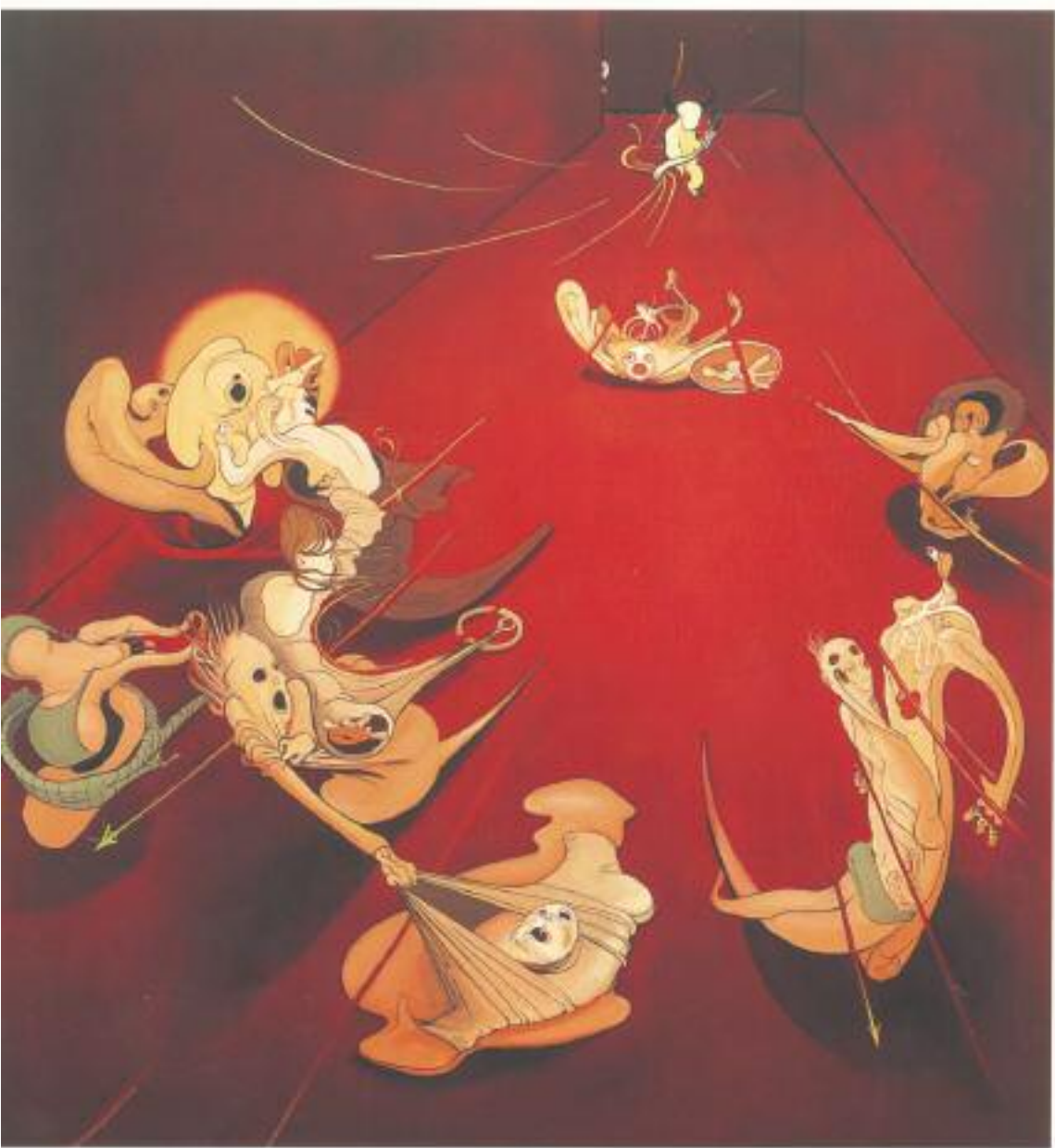


▲ **Inka Essenhigh** *Yellow Farkeys*, 1998, oil and enamel on canvas, 77.4 x 85 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

▲ **Inka Essenhigh** *White Rain*, 2001, oil and enamel on canvas, 183 x 188 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

ground is articulated in several colored bands, sometimes with strong outlines, not unlike the figures themselves, so that the space has become more complicated, even though it is still being defined by essentially graphic means. By the time she painted *WWF*, also dated 2001 but presumably from later in the year, Essenhigh was working entirely in oil but still using it pretty much the way she'd used the enamel in *White Rain*: zones of flatly painted color creating space—in this case with a rotary structure reminiscent of a baroque or rococo dome in which the figures look down from the edges—graphically. The current phase of Essenhigh's work emerges in her paintings of 2002, also painted in oil rather than enamel. The transformation of the space that was emerging gradually in *White Rain* or *WWF* is fully confirmed in a painting like *Mob & Minotaur*. The uninflected monochromatic ground that had turned into a more complex structure of multiple uninflected monochromatic zones or twisting bands has now become a full-bodied space defined by tone, by *chiaroscuro*, as well as by drawing. From the beginning, Essenhigh has been such an interesting colorist that it was never as obvious as it

should have been that her paintings were fundamentally conceived as drawings. Now that she is developing the more traditionally painterly dimension of her work it is possible to see the two coming into conflict. Essenhigh's handling of oil paint looks surprisingly diligent, if not demure—in any case somewhat inhibited in comparison with the self-conscious wildness of her imagery, though perhaps charmingly so. And yet the relative lack of integration between the painterly and linear aspects of Essenhigh's style is also something she can use to good stylistic effect. One of the strengths of the new paintings is precisely that they resemble classical representation much less than they do some mass-cultural derivative of classical painting. If anything, they might be cels from animated movies—though one might hesitate to show the feature presentation to the kiddies. What hasn't changed much is the nature of Essenhigh's imagery—not-quite-legible, sci-fi scenarios acted out by mutant anthropomorphic blobs in uniform—as critic Jane Harris memorably put it in the recent book *Vitamin P: New Perspective in Painting*, "amorphous taffy forms that fold, droop, and slide across her



shiny monochrome seas" and "wear scuba-diving equipment, ride motorcycles, brandish brass knuckles, and fight against unseen forces, not the least of which is the gravitational pull of their own weight made more unwieldy by the suction of drains and other vortices." (Essenhigh's imagery has always been just specific enough yet just vague enough to provoke commentators to descriptive intensity verging on purple excess.) The development from an essentially ornamental style to one that is relatively naturalistic has entailed a change in the figures' scale: Where they were once minute in comparison to the pictorial fields across which they struggled, but numerous and essentially interchangeable, they now tend to fill a greater portion of the canvas, being depicted in greater detail and thereby becoming at once more particularized and more ambiguous;

seen so near, their forms lose the definition they might have seemed to have from a distance. Or, inversely, as in the "marine" painting *Blue Wave*, the figure has nearly merged with its setting, which has itself become the main event. In all these paintings, curiously, the space has depth but the surfaces that define it have none—the sea, for instance, appears as a sort of metallic sheet beaten into wavelike patterns; elsewhere, the walls of a room give the impression of having no "other side," just as the bodies they contain are shapes without substance. I'm even tempted to say that Essenhigh's imagery is becoming less credible as it becomes at once more varied and more specific. The product of her draftsmanship, which is now becoming less important to the work as the more specifically painterly qualities of color and touch come more into focus, the imagery's arbitrariness



▲ Inka Essenhigh *Mob and Minotaur*, 2002, oil on canvas, 162.8 x 213.3 x 3.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

◆ Inka Essenhigh *Arrows of Fear*, 2002, oil on canvas, 108 x 178 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.

has become more striking. Which is perhaps why she is now experimenting with images that refer, in however oblique a fashion, to a familiar mythological theme—the story of the Minotaur, the half-human, half-bovine monster slain by the hero Theseus, who with the help of Ariadne was able to find his way out of the labyrinth the creature inhabited by trailing a thread behind him as he proceeded. The confusion of species exemplified by the Minotaur has long been a staple of Essenhigh's imagination but her creatures always seemed to act almost mechanically, without feeling. This is the first time she has shown them as either experiencing fear (in *Mob & Minotaur*) or causing it (in *Arrows of Fear*). The cool of the earlier paintings is gone. Now the confusion of identity goes far deeper, almost as it does in the following parable by the Italian writer Ennio Flaiano: "Theseus enters

the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur," wrote Flaiano in his *Diario degli eresi*. "He finds no one—goes forward, back: no one. Suddenly he realizes that the Minotaur is himself. He touches his head and feels the horns. Fur, paws. Full of terror because he knows that Theseus is looking for him, has entered the labyrinth to kill him. Confused flight of the Minotaur-Theseus. He bangs his head, trips, falls down, gets up out of breath. He sees Ariadne. *Oh, Ariadne, mia sorella!*—But there's Ariadne: with her thread in one hand and a sword in the other, ready to kill him." Yes, painting is a labyrinth, and Essenhigh seems to be drawing nearer to its center. But will her line lead her back out, and with what identity?

Inka Essenhigh was born in 1969 in Belfonte, Pennsylvania. She lives and works in New York.