

the village
VOICE



Retro Man

By R.C. Baker

In 1959, with Abstract Expressionism triumphant over a then much smaller art world, the Museum of Modern Art mounted "New Images of Man," an exhibition of existential, passionate, melodramatic figuration. Roundly panned at the time as airy humanism (Manny Farber decried the "wishful thinking buried under its sentimental hide"), the exhibit's international roster included Alberto Giacometti, Francis Bacon, and Karel Appel. Half a century later, sharp-eyed curator Mitchell Algué has reprised that moment, and proven that expressionistic figuration has a place in all but the stoniest of formalist hearts. In this gallery venue, Algué succinctly juxtaposes a few masters from the original MOMA show with past and present artists; compare Giacometti's lithograph of an attenuated model in an atelier, conveyed in his trademark searching line, to a charming 1953 studio interior by Bernard Buffet, which today looks equal parts Van Gogh and atmospheric Disney background. In this show, the retro representational impulse deplored by those earlier critics seems a healthy, ever-renewing strain capable of attracting artists of all persuasions. Nicholas Marsicano's 1956 oil painting Duo features a dark background leavened by two clotted, colorful shapes that might be figures, or perhaps the rough entrance to Plato's flame-lit cave. Forty years later, Joyce Pensato's Abominable Snow Mickey also plays with shifting negative space, the cartoon icon conjured from drippy black contours and a blizzard of white enamel. A fleshy fork is among the pink protuberances in Nicola Tyson's 2000 Self Portrait Dancing, which darkens the painting's goofy grace by calling to mind William S. Burroughs's harsh insistence that we honestly face whatever dangles from the ends of our own forks.

Backer, R.C., *The Village Voice*, "Retro Man," July 9, 2008.