

Art in America

October 2007

Jo Baer at Alexander Gray

That Jo Baer has thought long and hard about the nature of painting is clear. In her early (1960s-'70s), radically minimal and superbly elegant paintings, defined by their empty, glowing white centers and edged by simple bands of black and another thin line of color, she was attempting to expunge all hierarchy, ambiguity and illusion from her work. Apparently she got the need for such austerity out of her system, because her paintings since that time are chock-full of images and depend almost entirely on implied, and very obscure, narrative.

The four paintings shown at Alexander Gray were from 1990, 1991, 2000 and 2001, and in contrast to her early paintings, where the image mimics the stretcher beneath, these oils are done on canvases that are simply tacked to the wall. This formatting decision contributes to their unfinished, almost temporary feel, and Baer may well have chosen to employ this device, successfully or not, as a way of separating her work from the standard painting tradition. Indeed, the results resemble sketches more than paintings, in that she's not exploring the medium's expressive possibilities but using it

instead to delineate, drawing-style, specific images that we take to be symbolic—although of what, exactly, is never made clear.

The paintings from the '90s are pale and wispy, like illustrations by William Blake—obviously an intentional reference, since Baer has titled one of these works *Of a Fearful Symmetry (Bound Hand and Foot)*, after a line from Blake's poem "The Tyger." In the haze, blurry forms become at once figure and ground, appearing and disappearing like apparitions—a wraithlike woman, the arms and hands of a man in a jacket, the disembodied legs of someone in riding boots. Interspersed among these humanoid elements are animals that might be intended to be deer but look more like demonic dogs with horns. Outlined handprints, reminiscent of those in ancient cave painting, are scattered over all. The other painting from the '90s, *At the Back of the North Wind*, is named after a Victorian children's book in which the wind is portrayed as a sentient being, alternately beneficent and malign. The figures here include a hanging man, a deer leaping out of the picture frame and a majestic character with open hands who advances toward us, dreamlike and macabre.

The more recent paintings are still harder to parse, and harder also in terms of line and color. While the '90s paintings are ethereal, these are aggressive, especially *Shrine of the Piggies (The Pigs Hog it All and Defecate [sic] and Piss on Where From They Get It and With Whom They Will not Share. That's it)*. While people and animals are absent, outlines of what seem to be intestines and

male genitalia overlay a painting of a men's room in which the centrally positioned urinal, surmounted by a set of tall, cruciform plumbing pipes, appears as a shrine. The fourth painting, *Testament of the Powers That Be (Where Trees Turn to Sand, Residual Colours Stain the Lands)* is a strange confluence of mountains, flowers, fissures and roots that forms a blocky landscape. Although Baer's paintings—from paint application to heavy-handed symbolism—are clumsy in many ways, the fiercely passionate intention behind them is so palpable that it overrides other considerations.

—Carol Diehl

Jo Baer: *Testament of the Powers That Be (Where Trees Turn to Sand, Residual Colours Stain the Lands)*, 2001, oil on canvas, 71½ by 60¾ inches; at Alexander Gray.

