

Victoria Miro Gallery

Press Release

Inka Essenhigh

29 October – December 2002

The **Victoria Miro Gallery** in London and **303 Gallery** in New York will present new paintings by the American artist **Inka Essenhigh** with concurrent solo exhibitions in both cities this November. The exhibition at the **Victoria Miro Gallery** will chart the evolution of her work over the last two years with the change from enamel based paints to oil while the exhibition at **303 Gallery** will focus on the more recent paintings.

Essenhigh's large scale paintings create an enigmatic world in which animated action figures are cast alongside mythological characters and the demimonde in roles where time-honoured human concerns such as patriotism, religion, competitiveness and heroism are played out in futuristic landscapes. Her paintings often include the presence of scarcely individualized figures, hybrids existing somewhere between their bodies and their surroundings, inhabiting ordinary life situations and pursuing the promise of beauty and pleasure – shopping, going to the gym, getting a tan. Essenhigh's work is reflective of her ability to unite divergent influences, including Romanesque murals, the graphic stylised qualities of Art Nouveau, the iconography of Italian Renaissance painting and the aesthetic sensibilities of Japanese Ukiyo-e prints whilst at the same time reconstructing her own contemporary mythologies.

"I paint people doing things. People in my paintings are defined by what they do. Shoppers shop. Dancers dance. Birds fly. Victims scream. People are barely individualized beyond their own actions. The way they scream or fly or dance is shown by abstracting their bodies into gestures commonly used in cartooning. Perspectival space is distorted into flat space and sometimes both are used in the same picture. The lack of specific background is meant to imply that the actions may be going on indefinitely. I don't paint about right and wrong; the inhabitants of my paintings just do what they do".

Inka Essenhigh, August 2002

In an interview two years ago, **Essenhigh** spoke of her paintings as having "a lot of *Walt Disney* about them" suggesting Mattel plastic toys or animations, rather than fleshy beings. The stylised, humanoid characters in her paintings at that time were intended to look "fake", "plasticity" and "man-made", while also being "elegant". "I think of them as being about America: fake, fun, pop, violent, but also quite attractive." However the newer oil based paintings have extended her subject matter, denying the hard flat surfaces of the earlier paintings and investing them with more of a three dimensional quality.

Born in 1969 in Belfonte, Pennsylvania, the artist lives and works in New York. **Essenhigh** has shown in *Hybrids, International Contemporary Painting* at the **Tate Gallery**, Liverpool, in the 2nd **Berlin Biennale**, 2001, in the first Ghent Quadrennial - *Casino 2001* at the **Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst** and *Greater New York* at **P.S.1**, New York. Her work is included in the collections of the **Tate Gallery**, the **Seattle Art Gallery**, the **Whitney Museum of American Art**, the **Albright Knox Gallery** and the **Museum of Modern Art**, New York.

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