

The Highlights - Kristen Baker at Deitch Projects

Kristen Baker, *The Raft of Perseus*, 2006.

Kristen Baker's latest show is visually dazzling. The large-scale installation features a series of painting hybrids as well as wall mounted, rectilinear works. Baker has jettisoned her racecar motif in favor of an expression of speed itself, replete with acrylic explosions and the weightless, painless debris they spew. Walking through the show, I thought of the Italian Futurists, all bluster and dark optimism about the mechanistic promise of the new century. Similarly, Baker's work shares in a 21st-century celebration of technological pleasure even as it revels in its attendant dark side(s).

Flying Curve, Differential Manifold, a massive, freestanding painting, cuts through the center of the gallery. The piece acts as a physical parenthesis, bracketing the scope and ambition of Baker's efforts. Mounted on a hulking white metal armature, the work is equal parts industrial fabrication and digital color field painting. The curving plexiglass support is painted with shards of vibrantly translucent acrylic. These discreet plastic sections layer upon each other to become the close-up of a pixellated landscape or the blurred view from the window of one of Baker's speeding cars. In its balance of immaterial color and resolutely sculptural construction, the piece powerfully articulates digital space. Like the backlit laptop screen I type this on, the sublime hues remain anchored to the physical, never transcending the material world that supports the creation of such fantastic illusions.

Other works in the show perform similarly. Comparable to animated billboards running at high speed, they play all at once. Centrifugal chroma blasts alternate with stylishly manic reworkings of history painting. Corresponding to the media platforms they reference, the individual works resist gestalt and memory. Like the latest CGI-fueled theatrical explosion, you can recall the affect without being able to recreate its contours. It's precisely this convergence of spectacular visual effects without context that aligns the work most implicitly with the world of mass entertainment. It also confirms its more troubling implications.

The Raft of Perseus, an earlier work of Baker's, is included in the show and can be seen as a manifesto of sorts. The painting is modeled on Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*. This earlier depiction of France's forgotten poor, abandoned by their betters, was a political rallying point and a call for action. Baker has emptied her work of any empathetic figures, leaving the raft perpetually adrift in a sea of luxuriously artificial waves. Devoid of suffering, the historical tragedy, like the latest WWII-themed video game, morphs into pure visual

pleasure. The passive, apolitical viewer assumed for action blockbusters is similarly encouraged here. Baker shows her teeth with this one. Stunningly painted, the work is unapologetic digital disaster porn, endlessly riding the waves towards a never setting sun.