

ENRICO BAJ

STUCK ON KITSCH

No where in this show is there the self-consciousness other contemporary artists, particularly painters, currently face. The most recent chapter in Baj's forty-year oeuvre is a witty, self-assured, refreshingly enjoyable three-floor exhibition dedicated to the Garden of Earthly Delights. In his hometown showing, the artist has his big-eyed, greeting card-like characters play Adam and Eve alongside a menagerie of snakes, tigers, monkeys, and unnamed inhabitants of the Garden of Eden. What makes these paintings unmistakably Baj is his signature use of sewing-basket collage and "kitsch" ("Kitsch can be found in all the areas of our lives, but perhaps it is most apparent in art, where one would especially expect stylistic coherency," from a 1990 interview by Jean Baudrillard). Baj's kitsch lies in the work's cartoon atmosphere but especially in the introduction of sequins, military epaulettes, costume jewelry, and gaudy

trimmings of all fashions merrily scattered everywhere on the canvas: embroidery thread for the lion's mane; giant, spiralled golden brooches for breasts; thick, gem-like buttons for the tiger's eyes; pin-on stars dotting the sky. The overlaid, and therefore removable, necklaces and sequined patches artfully glued atop Adam and Eve's "naughty bits" are teasingly puritanical, recalling the leaves painted over Masaccio's Biblical figures and later erased. However, for all the fluorescent paint and the fussy, garish collage, the figures are exquisitely drawn and colored, the inevitable, impending sin and doom sensed throughout. Is Adam and Eve's fall akin to art's demise into kitsch?

No matter; a light-hearted mood nevertheless prevails, reiterated by the groups of tall, potted plants installed here and there about the gallery: a contemporary Garden of Eden growing the tame greenery which fills waiting

rooms and lobbies. Baj's insistence on referring to these works as "kitsch," however, seems outdated; the loud color and the harmonious, unobtrusive use of tacky decorations are only kitsch in the context of Milanese conservative good-taste and navy blue pin-stripe suits. Comparison is inevitable between Baj's kitsch and the wealth of predominately American artists currently working in this direction; the critical use of mass aesthetics by such artists as Pruitt/Early or Richard Prince, however, remains historically and formally distant from Baj's work. The ingrained, insinuating force of contemporary kitsch makes the tassels and braids, the ribbons and fringe seem nostalgic and ingenuous; they are masterfully applied, but as socially enlightening here as they would be stitched onto the hem of a skirt.

Gilda Williams

At Studio Marconi, Milan.



ADINOLFA, WHILE TAKING ONE OF HER USUAL WALKS IN THE DENSE FOREST OF BEHULIPHRUEN, TURNS AND SEES JUILLARD, 1990. ACRYLIC AND COLLAGE ON CANVAS, 100 X 160 CM.