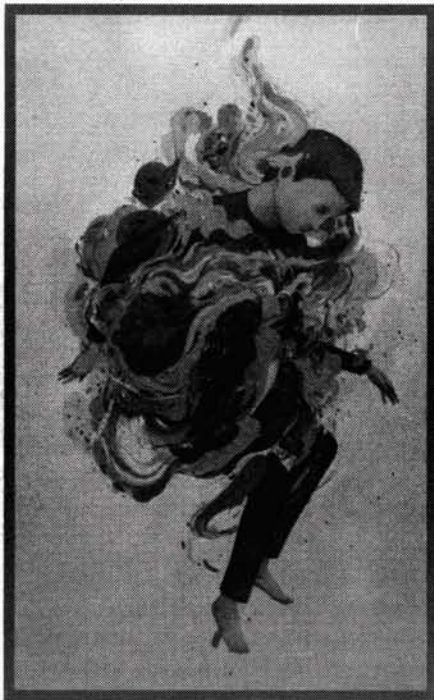
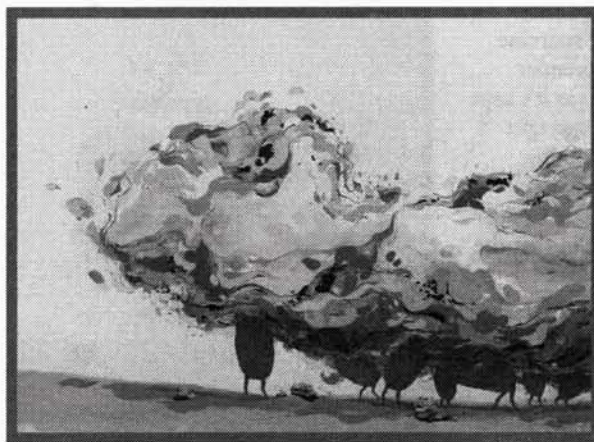


Brendan Monroe at Richard Heller Gallery

Painter and impresario of the idiomatic post-illustration tribe Brendan Monroe employs a folksy, cartoonish and somewhat maudlin sensibility to express the fact—often forgotten or never realized in the first place—that the planet earth is a living, breathing being to which human consciousness and existence are inextricably connected. His lexicon is rife with patterns abstracted from the natural world, especially dirt, grass, plants and rocks, which he either lends anthropomorphized attributes or sets up as representatives of the raw materials of creation. Yet his work is not political; rather, it is



Brendan Monroe, *So Many of It*, 2006, acrylic and collage on paper, 19-3/4" x 13-3/4", at Richard Heller Gallery, Santa Monica.



Brendan Monroe, *Stowing a Way*, 2006, acrylic and collage on paper, 23" x 33", at Richard Heller Gallery, Santa Monica.

intimate and personal, metaphorical and romantically symbolist, and manifests a seamless dovetailing of concept and form. Monroe's aggressive tactile compositions are literally built up off the large, heavy paper he favors; visceral architectures of acrylic paint, collages of translucent or colored papers, and a sensual, metonymical topographic impasto. In representing unformed materials of earth and pigment as symbols of creative instinct, and then including literal, dimensional surface, he makes of his work a coherent dualism—it is that which it also represents. In the realm of art, the work is paint and paper; in the world of idea it represents a primal, primordial act of self-expression.

One of the series' major works is *Stowing a Way* in which the smooth-skinned, clean-cut young man who inhabits a majority of the paintings is being spirited away by a Lilliputian race of sienna-hued bean people (more on this later). The boy is wrapped, like Joseph Beuys in his felt, in a cocoon of a wavy cloud of particulate matter which is another form of the idea-rich earth seen elsewhere in the series. The diminutive egg beings are called Sours—apparently Monroe had been going through a phase of drawing fruits and vegetables and his penchant for anthropomorphism asserted itself. After faces came arms and legs, then stories, personalities, activities and eventually a simple society. The humans in these paintings are not the avatars of the artist, they are the forms taken by the fine art he makes. It is these little ochre-skinned amoebas that stand in for the creative force of the draftsman, painter, sculptor or narrator. Giving them human attributes reinforces this level of their existence and gives viewers a way into the intimate and Jungian world of the

artist's story.

In smaller works in the series such as *So Many of It*, the boy (in his red pajamas like a Maurice Sendak character) is engulfed and lifted gently off his feet by a thickly composed but lightly drawn swarm of this molten earth dust. In *It Began Inside*, the boy breathes out and the dust exudes from every orifice, and in *Taking Her Away* an ecstatic girl relaxes into it. The connection between the swirling cloud of materials and

the heavier earth off which it blew is made more explicit in large works like *Sleep Deep* or *Tickler* in which a wide landscape yields a sudden mound of earth alive with rockslides, gleaming mineral deposits and lichen grudgingly reveals one end of its shape to be in fact a dissolute face, a man sleeping face down on the earth. Whether he is being built up from it or decaying down into it is not immediately clear; he exists at an intermediate stage that could be congealing or dissolving. The mound is teeming with active Sours, who transfer earth to and fro in what seems to be an attempt to refine his shape. *Holding My Seams* is a more purposeful scene of a man's torso rising up from the sand and stone with the aid of the Lilliputian pod-people. Both this man's body and the mass of the earth mound are thickly built off the paper using the self-referential strategy of densely detailed impasto. The quiet, poetic exertions of the creative subconscious are honored in these paintings, as Monroe succeeds in creating works of strength and beauty that examine the creative impulse with a courageously transparent spirit.

—Shana Nys Dambrot

Brendan Monroe: *Blob, Blob, Blob* closed in May at Richard Heller Gallery, Santa Monica.

Shana Nys Dambrot is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.