

# Meliksetian MB Briggs



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## Meg Cranston

BOESKY & CALLERY

Even after poststructuralism's contestation of subjectivity and conceptualism's demolition job on the art object, a stubborn residue remains. For lack of a better term, Meg Cranston calls this residue "soul," and works at its contours with lyrical wit. Two recent sculptural installations illustrated how Cranston continues to push the bodily envelope of the type of conceptual California scheming with which she has been associated for over a decade. *Mind, Body, Soul*, 1997, consisted of a large rectangular block of wood, some rope, and a handcart. It was as if everything depended on this red-painted wagon hefting the wooden corpus held in place by the rope: the podium-shaped wood block, the exhibition, maybe even the fate of the soul itself. No human touch was involved, save the heaving, tying, and pushing of the generic block into its apparently arbitrary place in the gallery. The possibility of delivery—spiritual or actual—seemed far off, as if the package had been rerouted or somehow lost in a postal network with a mysterious logic.

*Prop for a Soul Singer (i.e. Marvin Gaye)*, 1997, extended this circuitous line of inquiry. A '70s-era beige couch, it rested on a portable dolly, revealing its rodent tail of rope. The piece's title refers to an apocryphal story about the performer of such longing-filled, nigh-unbearably soulful musical compositions as "Inner City Blues," "I Want You," and "Sexual Healing" which has it that Gaye had long fantasized about reclining on a couch while performing live. Cranston's elaboration of this story was to imagine the size, shape, and

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upholstery of Gaye's couch, thereby giving props to his prop. In so doing, she wheeled out a series of tragic narrative associations that complicated the simple homage: Gaye's drug abuse and consequent obsessiveness bordering on paranoia, his waning interest in sex, and his eventual murder at the hands of his father—a horrible reversal of the Oedipal scenario itself invoked in the piece by the appearance of the analyst's couch.

The show also marked the first New York exhibition of Cranston's paintings. Of the four shown here, all the same size, most impressive and resonant were *Ganesh Remover of Obstacles*, 1997, and *Mice/Men or please don't Burn my Yo-Yo*, 1997, both of which seemed to conjure a nebulous spiritual realm and the sometimes tragic, sometimes funny barriers that bar access to it. In *Ganesh*, a silhouette of a figure (a young woman?) in the center of the canvas was outlined against a brownish-gold background. Below, a flesh-colored tentacle-shaped root pulled the figure downward, while all around gamboled small elephants, representations of the Hindu deity Ganesh, effaced to varying degrees by other layers of paint. A spectrum of color swatches—each an almost archetypal '70s hue of red, pink, or orange—cut horizontally through the center of the painting, perhaps stressing the arbitrariness of the representation as well as the materiality of paint. *Mice/Men* also depicted a standing figure in silhouette, though this time at the very edge of the painting. Here, the figure, placed behind a bar-code-like curtain of vertical black stripes, observed the dramatic action on the other side of the canvas: illustrated mice, reminiscent of protagonists in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, cavorting in their sector.

Both of these paintings exhibited Cranston's deployment of an idiosyncratic iconography: *Ganesh Remover of Obstacles* invoked Hinduism and metempsychosis, albeit in an advertising mode; while *Mice/Men* gestured toward Nietzsche's distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, but did so with Lichtensteinian comics and '70s album covers in mind. This iconography linked Cranston's carefully constructed paintings to her readymade-style installations—the mice motif, for example, echoed the tail trailing *Prop for a Soul Singer*—and revealed the kernel of her conceptualist soul-mining to be neither the bliss of redemption nor liberation through transcendence, but, rather, the compulsiveness of narrative itself.

—Nico Israel