

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Art review: Steven Hull at Rosamund Felsen Gallery

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Steven Hull, "Engine Room," 2013, mixed media (Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times)

Steven Hull has done many projects that cross boundaries typically drawn among artists from various disciplines, including writers, musicians, illustrators and performers, as well as within disciplines like painting and sculpture. A new, psychologically prickly body of work brings marionettes into the delirious mix.

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Hull titles the show “Balcony,” the term for a gallery found in a theater. At Rosamund Felsen, 10 tableaux mix abstract paintings, both gestural and geometric, with assorted masks and figures.

One room also includes vintage marionettes loaned for the occasion from the Bob Baker Archive – a bony skeleton, a baggy clown, an anthropomorphic flower and more. The art gallery is unveiled as a puppet theater, a public stage for surrogate emotion and substitute activity.

The centerpiece driving the elaborate exhibition is “Engine Room,” a sprawling, mixed-media assemblage of paintings and sculptures incorporating sound and light. Enter the room and a motion detector turns on spotlights and starts a rotary fan spinning, in turn causing a pinwheel to spin, a paper airplane to flutter, a Chinese lantern to twirl and little bells to tinkle. The theatrical display is backed by nearly 20 paintings of disparate sizes, all stacked and leaning against the wall. The paintings' gestural explosions of vivid color tend toward Day-Glo, a clamoring for attention. Gesture signifies inner emotion being made visible, but its raucous abundance here mostly mixes incoherent chaos with psychedelic fun.

Out in front of the paintings, an array of furniture-like props is painted flat-black. These sculptural elements are reminiscent of works by artists as disparate as Louise Nevelson and Tony Smith. They create a rabbit-warren of little black-box theaters housing a variety of goofy masks.

Surprisingly, Hull's carnival also extends to sober geometry. Take a Frank Stella black painting, all rational solemnity, that turns up here in a version painted raspberry pink. A bicycle wheel that cannot spin conjures Marcel Duchamp – only stuck.

The cacophony of opposing artistic styles, from Expressionist vitality to Constructivist logic and Dada subversion, gives Hull's revelry its punch. Part savvy satire, part innocent playroom, his tableaux perform an irreverent burlesque.

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Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica,
(310) 828-8488, through Oct. 12. Closed Sun. and Mon.

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