

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Review Artist Steven Hull takes a seat at the dark carnival of life

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A detail of Steven Hull's "She's Losing the Light Fast" (2015), acrylic on canvas. (Rosamund Felsen Gallery)

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New paintings, sculptures and a group of compelling drawings by Steven Hull are eccentric evocations of the risks, rewards and penalties of going out beyond one's usual limits.

For his 11th solo show at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Hull goes out to sea. Anchored by sculptures of a sailboat and battleships loosely reminiscent of Chris Burden's work, the show also features paintings and drawings on carnival themes. They recall early Modernist images of life as a tragicomic circus of love and loss, stylish dignity struggling with inelegant humiliation.

In one big, brash painting, its cartoon figures set before a background of Expressionist-style slathers of gestural paint, a masked woman tootles along in a clown car past an enervated human skull resting on a stump. A crescent moon hangs overhead, impassively observing unavoidable doom.

The two themes come together at the show's entrance, where a wide, pedestal-bound, almost toy-like sculpture sports an orange sailboat churning along on a choppy, dangerous sea. The storm-tossed boat, an age-old symbol of life's difficult journey, is guided in its trek by a bobbing pair of large, pink buoys up ahead; the floats are a caricature of a woman's breasts.

Hull -- whose name intimates a slyly autobiographical component to the imagery of ships -- layers the personal with the political in works whose militaristic motifs speak bluntly of our current world. A large, silent, gray battleship dominates one room, while a raucous calliope plays in another gallery festooned with strings of bare light bulbs.

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The drawings are especially notable, made with a transfer process in which Hull draws on glass with black oil paint and ink, then presses absorbent paper over the result and peels it away. Each is a unique monotype.

Stylistically they recall German precedents, from Max Beckmann and Otto Dix in the 1920s to Neo-Expressionists in the 1980s. Their subjects are similarly erotic, scatological and forlorn. Eager desire merges with dark desolation.

The promise of a bright reward doesn't mean that a harsh price won't also be extracted. Given the potential rewards of emotional risk, Hull's savvy acknowledgment of the penalty part keeps the work from indulging in sentimental, greeting card banalities.

Rosamund Felsen Gallery, 1923 Santa Fe Ave., Los Angeles, (310) 828-8488, through Feb. 6. Closed Monday.