

Zsolt Bodoni

„Gods and Mortals“

May 14 – June 18, 2011

Mihai Nicodim Gallery is delighted to present “Gods and Mortals”, Zsolt Bodoni's second solo show at the gallery. The artist's first solo exhibition earned him critical acclaim, with writers noting his adept hand and darkly dramatic imagery tempered by cool decision making and considerable painterly ability: *“Bodoni firmly resists the seduction of poetic embellishment, conceptual or painterly, a restraint that pays off in a dynamic tension between seemingly tentative passages of blurry abstraction and human forms and cityscapes described with shimmering clarity”*. Lara Taubman, *Art in America* (10/22/09). This second solo show not only builds upon the artist's reputation but reveals a body of painting that confirms Bodoni's place amongst the strongest of a new generation of young figurative painters.

It has become apparent over the past few years that a number of young artists - principally, but not exclusively from Central and Eastern Europe - have emerged onto the world scene to great acclaim; putting to shame those critics who from the 1960's through to the 1990's, sought to keep figurative painting far from the epicenter of the art world. Painting was deemed to be 'passé' by many, 'over' by others and, on many occasions, proclaimed as well and truly 'dead'. Those who still believed it was possible to be a painter and a successful visual art often felt obliged to work in clever conceptual twists to their paintings in order to validate their work. The generation of artists (predominantly those in their early 30's through to their early 40's) who are garnering attention now recognize the importance of bringing something new to this age old medium, but reject the corny devices or world weary irony that characterized so much of the painting of the late 20th and early 21st Century. Instead they prefer to use their chosen medium to create a dialogue with the viewer, allowing the power of paint in all its plastic, tactile and inviting nature, to draw together diverse forms and subject matter collated from old master paintings, sculptures, books, magazines, and that most contemporary of mediums, the internet.

Zsolt Bodoni's new works make no apologies for the reinvestigation of age old subject matter: most notably the female nude and the equestrian statue. With their roots in antiquity and re-births throughout art history, it might be imagined that these symbols of love, beauty and power might have completed their cycles of reincarnation. Not so. Bodoni turns again to the foundries that have inspired so much of his recent bodies of work. Venus is reborn again but Mars, so often her companion in Renaissance painting, is present here too amidst the engines of war: powerful machines, workers and half finished assemblages. Great, half finished equestrian statues are inspected for approval and, lest we forget the cost to animals as well as humans in wartime, Bodoni reminds us by depicting a horse in a gas mask, plodding obediently and precariously along a makeshift track as a great war ship prepares to embark far below.

Of late, Bodoni has been increasingly interested in the motivations that lead to war. *Casus Belli* as the Romans knew it has been prompted by acts of aggression but often by the destruction, or rumoured destruction of something poignant or symbolic to a particular people. The bones of saints have been fought and died over. Strange masks and caskets were created at huge expense to protect and preserve what amounted to ghastly visions of mummified features yet these were often revered and worshipped, and in some cases still are, the objects believed to be invested with supernatural powers. In his recent paintings, Bodoni has also begun to consider the role of signifiers in relation to human responses. Sometimes it's sufficient for an item of clothing to evoke an emotive reaction. It might be a pair of boots, or a glove or a uniform; such as the uniform worn by an infamous general which when discovered by a party of soldiers looking to arrest the owner, was shot to pieces out of their frustration at his 'getting away'.

Bodoni understands that humans need symbols. He's not judgemental in his depictions, and he isn't pointing the finger at the modern world as so many are wont to do. The statuary of the ancient world isn't so very far removed from the mortal gods of today's celebrity culture. In Bodoni's paintings these heroes and heroines are recycled; caught either in the moment of rebirth or re-casting. Each time may produce its own icons but, Bodoni appears to be saying, nothing will last forever. Even as the artist exposes this cycle of construction and destruction he reminds us that the pursuit of beauty and the act of investing an object with particular meaning, can result in terrible destruction. Bodoni doesn't labour the point, he just traces the course. If we make gods out of mortals, Bodoni seems to be saying: trouble will follow. Lest we need convincing further, a female nude holds up the grinning skull of a ram. The painting is an allegory of beauty and death; the one irretrievably linked with the other.