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Punchline in Search of a Comedian: Jayson Musson takes on Nancy

by Noah Dillon

Jayson Musson: Abstract Art Exhibit at Salon 94 Bowery

May 7 to June 20, 2014

243 Bowery (at Staton Street)

New York City, 212 979 0001



Installation view, "Jayson Musson: Abstract Art Exhibit," courtesy of Salon 94.

Nancy, the aesthetically conservative comic strip created by Ernie Bushmiller in 1938, isn't especially liked among the cartoons on the funny pages, but it has a curiously devoted following among some artists. Fans have included Andy Warhol, Joe Brainard and avant-garde comics artist Mark Newgarden, each of whom has reproduced altered versions of the mischievous young girl who is the strip's protagonist. Quasi-Dada cartoonist Bill Griffith remarked, with some praise, "Everybody that loves *Nancy* loves it in a slightly condescending way. *Nancy* is comics reduced to their most elemental level." In his current show at Salon 94's Bowery location, Jayson Musson joins *Nancy*'s fan club, declaring his devotion in sculptures and paintings, with mixed success.

Whereas older artists sought to expose the bizarre and seductive nature of *Nancy*'s banality, Musson intends to affirm the comic's beauty. He ignores *Nancy* herself to focus on paintings and sculptures that sometimes appeared as set pieces in her forays to museums or galleries to grok and mock the art on display. In a chiding and indignant tone, Bushmiller used his character to snub much of contemporary art as a sham and no better or more valuable than the finger paintings of children, occasionally having *Nancy* create her own messy abstract paintings. Musson has appropriated the objects of ridicule, rather than the finger-pointing avatar.

His attitude about the appropriations is ambivalent. Quoted in the press release, Musson claims, "[Bushmiller] drafted some perfect paintings. ... In his pejorative depictions of abstraction lay a symmetry, balance, and economy of form that is simply exceptional." Later, however, he continues, "To recreate some of these works ... and set them into the context of exhibiting them as verifiable works of art is perverse in a way, and perhaps confirms Bushmiller's point of view about the whole operation of art." His attitude is not quite cynical, but Musson might possibly profit from the perversity, humoring both Bushmillerites and aesthetes.

Musson's paintings and sculptures are not without merit. His reproductions are made with colorful Flashe acrylics rather than black-and-white ink, or as powder-coated fiberglass sculptures in three dimensions rather than two. Musson has invented the palette, and his use of color is smart — not quite reminiscent of the bold, slightly muddy tones of traditional comic strips and comic books. He's shown himself capable of making handsome choices in his previous show at Salon 94, which featured paintings made of Coogi sweaters. But the *Nancy* paintings feel disappointingly like a punchline without a clearly articulated joke. As with Bushmiller's comics, all the action is dead in the middle and a bit corny; the images are constricted, pushed toward the center of the canvas. Add to this the strangeness of Salon 94's premises, with its small upper gallery and its cavernous, high-ceilinged lower space, and the whole thing feels overbearing and crowded — big without being ambitious.

Works that succeed are also the ones that are most attractive. *Fritzi's Painting I* (all 2014), named after *Nancy*'s caretaker aunt, is a lusciously matte azure with a jumbled set of



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Jayson Musson, *Fritzi's Painting I*, 2014. Flashe on canvas, 96 x 75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94.

graphic marks: spirals, triangles and a brushstroke-like flourish running to the left. The symbols are rendered in a tastefully complementary set of mauve, green and pale yellow, whereas most of the other paintings are drawn in only two or three hues.

The identification with comics is made only sparingly explicit. Figurative imagery, such as a bulbous pink man with a hole in his middle called *Sculptural Allegory for a Specific Cultural Sphere*, points to the derivation. And the inclusion of text in signs painted on panel, reading "ART EXHIBIT" or "ART MUSEUM ?," root the show in what Art Spiegelman called "comix," a portmanteau he developed to note the power of co-mixing text with imagery. Comics can be a really powerful medium, a fact that Musson showed in his cartoonish 2009 drawings series, *Barack Obama Battles the Pink Robots*, but doesn't exploit so much here.

Musson is probably best known for his web series *Art Thoughtz* (2010-2012), published under the alter ego Hennessy Youngman, a Henny Youngman-like art critic who dresses and speaks with caricatured mannerisms based on stereotypes of hip-hop culture. Youngman (more deftly than Musson does here) satirizes the mechanics of art making and artspeak, explaining, among other issues, the significance of the sublime and post-structuralism, the

monopolistic careers of Bruce Nauman and Damien Hirst, and how to get a curator's attention (bring her roses). Youngman's lampoon of art fully becomes art itself. The deployment of visual and verbal rhetoric, of sequential imagery, shares more with comics and is far more thoughtful than Musson's current series. One imagines that Musson didn't want to be pigeonholed or stuck in a project he's grown bored with, but still, one wishes he would retire the comics and bring back his comedian.



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