

Frieze

October 2010

p. 240

Jo Baer & John Wesley



John Wesley
Rudyard Kipling
1964
Ink and graphite on paper
1x1 m

Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, USA

'Jo and Jack: Jo Baer and John Wesley in the Sixties' was a tight and punchy selection - curated by Baer's son, Josh Baer - of paintings and drawings produced (for the most part) between 1960 and '68 when the artists were living together in New York. The contrast between Baer and Wesley's work seems, at first glance, to be big. Hers is abstract, austere, minimally effacing the pictorial plane of the canvas in favour of the sides. His: figurative, poppy and goofily surreal. Look again and affinities start to emerge: the hard-edged application of paint, similarly odd palettes (flat grey or heavy grey-blue-purple grounds leavened with lilacs, peppermints or shocking pinks). Where Baer avoids using the centre of the canvas at all, Wesley's paintings are almost all based around centrally placed motifs - as if each artist were making way for the other, complementing rather than competing. Where her work prefers rectilinearity, his opts for roundels and curves.

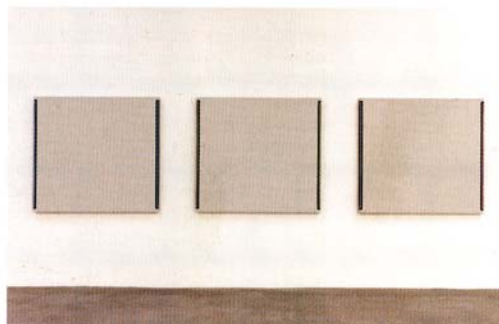
Wesley's paintings make the first move on the viewer: they are snappy, irresistibly graphic and often funny, though, as with the best kind of absurdist humour, you're never entirely sure why you're laughing. I suspect it's got a lot to do with the unexpected, with that old Surrealist adage

about 'the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table'. Executed with comic-book-style hard outlines and an economy of detail, Wesley gives us Rudyard Kipling encircled by flying Elizabeth Taylor heads, a train of camels trekking across the canvas above a pair of haughty peacocks, a young boy catching babies that are mysteriously falling from the sky, a quartet of almost identical Native American heads (one of which happens to be George Washington). These paintings are sharp and amusing, but what makes them consistently compelling is that they never quite give up the secrets of their iconography. (That said, though the link between Kipling and Liz Taylor seems obscure, that between Washington and Native Americans is tragically all too well-known.) With their decorative borders, Wesley's compositions also suggest emblems, heraldic designs or bookplates; they look like images whose coded signs may have more practical usages. Often classed as a Pop artist - though Donald Judd regarded Wesley as a fellow traveller and reserved permanent space for him in Marfa - Wesley's paintings most remind me of the work of Scottish artist and writer Alasdair Gray, whose murals and book illustrations share a similar visual crispness, each element of the picture having its own important symbolic function.

Baer's paintings reward the patient, lingering gaze. The works in this show almost all make use of the sides and edges of the canvas rather than the pictorial plane. They encourage the viewer to take multiple perspectives on the painting: in shifting position, you shift the relationship of elements and colours to each other. The striped black and coloured 'side bars' appear almost like clasps, holding up the otherwise untouched light grey-toned surfaces of her paintings. (Notably, both Baer and Wesley seem to have a liking for border, and the back room of the gallery featured a small drawing by Baer in which she has drawn far more intricate and less austere border strips.) Her framing encourages the viewer to start looking at the painting from the edges, rather than the centre of their optical field. Yet stay with these paintings for a few minutes, standing square in front of them, and the large blank areas start to fizz around the peripheries: the painted edges of the canvases create an optical effect whereby the negative areas almost start to 'bulk out' and take on a ghostly volume.

'Jo and Jack' was like an invitation to listen in on an intimate conversation, one in which you learn that beneath superficial differences of opinion may lie deeper agreements.

Dan Fox



Jo Baer
Untitled
(Wraparound
Triptych - Blue,
Green, Lavendar)
1969-74
Oil on canvas
Each panel:
1.2x1.3 m