



**Nigel Cooke**  
The Goss-Michael Foundation, Dallas  
Through February 18  
by Benjamin Lima

Nigel Cooke is a gifted and versatile British painter whose work wrestles with a characteristically postmodern dilemma: do you pursue a grand vision, beset by doubts about its ultimate truth, or do you assert a freedom from all such visions, and worry about falling into nihilist, meaninglessness? The paintings on view at the Goss-Michael Foundation are complex enough to hedge their bets; their response to this dilemma can be interpreted in two opposing ways. Either a surface-level play with absurdity establishes a credibility that allows Cooke to pursue the quest of the romantic artist (Van Gogh is a recurring reference) without being embarrassed about it, or Cooke, knowing that the glorious dream of true vision in painting will always prove impossible, expresses this by endlessly undercutting his own such efforts with pictorial jokes. (The intractability of these questions could also be read as a cautionary tale about what happens to people who pursue advanced studies in art history; Cooke received a Ph.D. from Goldsmith's College, University of London, in 2004, with a thesis on "The ambivalence of the undead: entropy, duality and the sublime as perspectives on contemporary painting.")

The exhibition includes ten paintings, most around seven feet tall and up to ten feet wide—some on canvas and some on linen. A single painting dates to 1997, two others are from 2005-06, and the remainder from the past four years. There are also a number of patinated bronze sculptures—heads in baseball caps, fried eggs, anchors (i.e. *The Raft*, 2010)—that might have served as models for the paintings.

In spite of the timespan, there are still some significant gaps in respect to a survey of Cooke's work: nothing like, for example, the widely discussed *Silva Morosa* (2003), as a representative of the 2004 exhibition at Andrea Rosen that introduced him to the U.S., and *Mummy* (2004) representative of his early -2000s blank-space-cum-sublime-landscape-cum-graffiti-wall period. *Experience* (2009), on view here, is a good representative of the "artist-figure as pathetic pseudo-Van-Gogh sad-sack" series, but one should be aware of the other works in that series, most notably *Departure* (2009-2010), a triptych in explicit dialogue with *Max Beckmann's 1930s triptych* of the same title. To me, the most interesting paintings in the exhibition are those from 2011, such as *Bathers* and *Siren*, in which central female nudes resting in mock-pastoral landscapes fight for visibility among assorted detritus' lying on the ground and enormous Richter-esque squeegee smears that completely wipe away vast stretches of detail.

Several leitmotifs within Cooke's imagery indicate the artist's ambivalence about the idea of completely serious painting. I noted multiple instances of a book bearing the one-word title "CRAP" (cf. again the artist's educational background, above), but there are also the many figures with blue clown noses, trucker hats and sleeveless T-shirts, empty beer cans and other sorts of litter. The pure grid of modernist architecture shows up many times, but usually suffering from graffiti, weeds, or other such indignities. Also, many of the figures seem to be standing around somewhat aimlessly, rather than engaging in serious action or contemplation.

The gender politics of heroic creativity are treated in the same irreverent manner, with what look like long, sinuous spermatozoa entwined among the vegetation, and terminating with goofy smiley faces on their heads. These smiley sperm are the counterparts of the shaggy, beer-drinking artist guys in *Interference* (2011) and *Thinker Ashore* (2010); perhaps likable, but hard to truly respect. Most extreme along these lines is *Nightfall* (2005), which has a long cigarette with a glowing pink tip (that is itself a face, smoking another tiny cigarette) wedged into a cleft within a large, bulbous banana lying on the ground. *Nightfall* seems to ask: How Freudian can a painting get, before it is no longer possible to seriously attempt a Freudian interpretation of that same painting?

As creative and diverting as Cooke's work surely is, on viewing it I had a hard time not succumbing to a certain nostalgia for the *gravitas* of a Max Beckmann. Is the sense of knowingness and ambivalence really the best possible response to the postmodern dilemma? Is enjoyable humor the most important task for someone of Cooke's talents to undertake? Or am I misinterpreting the work, and perhaps completely missing a tragic pathos that others have suggested is central to Cooke's work? At the very least, it is to the artist's credit that such questions are front and center.

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