

NEW ART examiner

PAUL LA MANTIA
SONIA ZAKS GALLERY

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It still can, after all, come down to a determined commitment toward rampant and lurid fantasies about sex and aggression. Paul La Mantia's strangely hypnotic paintings are like hotly contested scrummages, top-speed pictures filled beyond the brim with a panoply of imagery that finally evokes a sense of stunned surfeit. He jams his surfaces full of the catalogue of unmediated, pubescent, heterosexual male desire: there's no shortage in La Mantia's inventory of disembodied women with bullet-shaped breasts, no limit to his ruminations on the taut applications of Spandex and fish-net hose, no need to fear he'll run out of inventive uses for garter belts and lingerie. His brush touches these items into being like a leering and loving tongue, so immersed seems La Mantia in the sheer pictorial thrill of creating a parallel site for his fantastic visions of womanhood.

Instead of human heads, La Mantia gives these women none at all, or some sci-fi mix of geeky and scary insects with enormous staring eyes, making mutant caricatures with emphasis on the parts of their bodies he finds most salacious. His busy and obsessive linear flow and his predilection for tones of lemon yellow and sharp lavender keep these pictures popping. It's a relentless, pedal-to-the-metal aesthetic, so stylized and scrupulous in its reflection of its appeal to his system of desire as to be completely mesmerizing.

It would be simple enough to dismiss these paintings, and the more than 20 years of quite similar work that precedes them, as the excessive edge

of a particular brand of low-brow local painting, as the stubborn residue of the curiously retrograde misogyny that has marked a certain amount of what is known as Chicago Imagism. What gives them a different stature, I think, and what links them in my mind to some of Picasso's works of the '20s and '30s, is their overtness and incredible frankness, the uncensored and unrepressed manner in which La Mantia is willing to air his litanies of desire and pos-



Paul La Mantia

Still Lives, 1995. Oil on canvas, 66" x 78".

Photo courtesy of Sonia Zaks Gallery.

session. These things excite him, these pictographs of fantasy and domination, these paeans to a world of male hipsters and their oh-so-gorgeous attendant molls, these tantric wheels of titillation all identifying the heightened emotional states that seem to make his blood course, stirring his imagination toward episodes that are extremely compelling to witness. It is, in a way one does not encounter much any more, a barefaced declaration of some engines of tumescence, and to the incredibly complicated, ambiguous, and contradictory conditions of certain aspects of human sexual desire.

~James Yood