



Raynes E. Birkbeck, *Love on the Beach*, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 × 48".

Raynes E. Birkbeck

SITUATIONS

General George S. Patton was famous for many things, including his vicious, ugly temper and a taste for bespoke pistols with ivory handles, made by Smith & Wesson. In a painting by the self-taught artist Raynes E. Birkbeck—which appeared in “Scenes on the Move,” his solo show at the tiny Chinatown gallery Situations—the military hothead admittedly looks kinda *hot*, portrayed as a beefy, hirsute daddy who sports kneepads, tight shorts, wrist cuffs, and a Technicolor harness with a golden breastplate. Birkbeck, similarly attired, stands next to Patton. The artist’s engorged pink nipples contrast marvelously with his cocoa skin. Both men, ready to party, pose on the russet sands of a beach on a clear day—a picture of the good life.

Birkbeck, a lifelong New Yorker who was born in the Bronx in 1956, is a poet, painter, sculptor, and draftsman. This multihyphenate maker's work illustrates a sci-fi paradise where humankind is polyamorous, omnisexual, multigendered, *magical*. Sadly, however, his sensuous realms are often plagued by war. As in the art of Henry Darger or Malcolm Morley—both of whom are well known for their depictions of violent conflicts that were either based on the historical, the deeply personal, or a combination thereof—the brutality of real life and inner turmoil inevitably creep into Birkbeck's fantastical narratives. Yet his objects are always suffused by an unrepentant, hedonistic eroticism, a cockeyed humor, and a generous heart. He often inserts himself into his dynamic and frenetically wrought images, too: our queer, black Virgil—handsome, kinky—guiding us through all manner of wild adventure.

The exhibition was made up of several oil and oil-and-acrylic paintings, a number of ceramic sculptures, and a mural adjacent to the gallery's big storefront window. Across from the entrance, a trio of canvases hung in a vertical row. Like a star on a Christmas tree sat the dainty *Love Boat R.E.B. the Bearded Man* (all works 2019), a self-portrait of the artist (Birkbeck's initials make up the *R.E.B.* of the title) with two other burly guys on a cruise ship, surrounded by verdant hills and what might be half of a teal sun in a milky sky. All of the men are nude and proudly display their bellies, tits, and dicks (the last of which called to mind pieces of fresh marzipan). The scene in the painting below this one took place on a battlefield and again starred Patton, shooting off some kind of phallic-ooze cannon. Soldiers in Batman costumes surround him as a fleet of sauropods comes racing in from behind. Planes and zeppelins dot the air, while the turquoise silhouettes of ships quiver in the background. Near these works were four modestly sized ceramic pieces arranged on a shelf, including *B.A.T.* (the acronym stands for Battle Action Teams), another rendition of the Caped Crusader (who comes with a removable beanie); and *R.E.B. in Training, Doing the Splits*, another Birkbeck self-portrait, positioned as the title describes, with arms outstretched and head aimed high, like a sassy Broadway baby.

But the exhibition's golden sweetheart was the four-foot-square, oil-and-acrylic *Love on the Beach*, in which a radiant Birkbeck, towering like a splendid sex god, is breastfeeding other American war heroes—including Admirals William Halsey Jr. and Chester W. Nimitz—at a ritualistic-looking orgy under a sliver of palm tree. J. Edgar Hoover and a

male friend, both naked and hard, take in the juicy action from the sidelines. Birkbeck stares right at the viewer as his group of sucklings greedily eat, grope, and fuck. He looks surprised—not because of what’s happening, of course, but because you’re just standing there and not joining in.

— *Alex Jovanovich*

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