

Review of "The Big Bang"

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Review: "The Big Bang" by Matt Relkin at Beep Beep Gallery

Posted by Jessica Blankenship on Mon, Jun 14, 2010 at 5:30 PM

After years spent exploring the human and emotional implications of 9/11, New York based artist Matt Relkin is embracing the regenerative aspect of tragedy in his new show "The Big Bang", which opened at Beep Beep Gallery last Saturday, June 12.

Here's the basic rundown: "The Big Bang" is composed of a series of small paintings that depict Relkin's stand-by image of the Black Tower, dripping blood, preternatural landscapes, symbol-heavy skyscapes, all punctuated by brilliant, singular bursts of color. The symmetry and invocation of sacred geometry throughout the paintings lend a sense of order to a topic that has resulted in more personal, political and cultural chaos than anything else in recent history. And that seems to be the point: we can make sense of tragedies, human feelings and fallibility, and man-made messes if we relate things to the inherent order of the cosmos.

From depictions of a subtle slow boil of fragile life creeping into scenes of stark dark space to all out vibrant explosions of kinetic color, Relkin's new work conveys a distinct feeling that there is, despite any destructive forces, a blinding light at the end of the dark tunnel. When nothing in the man-made world makes sense (9/11 being the perfect example - what a confusing clusterfuck of cold concrete and politics that was), the battered human mind can find a grounding clarity in nature, which revolves around the balance of waxing and waning times, green and grey. Like, yes, this totally sucks but that's because things have to suck sometimes. It's just the way things go. And it seems Relkin has found some peace there; the small series of paintings representing seasonal and celestial changes prove that Relkin isn't perpetually dismal after 9/11. He's realistically optimistic. Optimistic because, at least according to nature, it is realistic to anticipate something new and bright and shiny - a Big Bang to heal old wounds.

This struck me: for a collection of work that so clearly deals with human emotions, there is not one human figure to be found in the paintings. Perhaps at this point (and it seems Relkin knows this), the image of the black monolith is so closely tied in the American psyche to the gritty personal suffering of 9/11 that nothing more is required. In fact, anything more might be overkill, even emotionally exploitative. Likewise, the human applications of death, silence, renewal and creation that these works explore are easily related to our own lives without having to stick a person in the picture to make it real to us. This is a show to be felt, not read. "The Big Bang" isn't about reveling in the sadness of tragic events. That's what comes through the second, or third time you make it around the gallery (do that, by the way. Don't look at these paintings just once.) After all, the largest works in the show are the bright, lively paintings whose radiant motions come right out at you. After a while, you can't help but feel caught in a suspended surrender of push-and-pull between the intrusive bursting action of the colorful pieces and the recessive, magnetic, drawing-in quality of the bleeding towers and bleak winter scenes. Apparently, Relkin wants to invite his audience to give themselves to the pain of tribulation and the melancholic afterglow, but only as part of a natural, restorative process; sometimes things have to come down before something fresh can come forth. With this show, the creation part comes in almost obtrusively, as if forcing our feelings through the cycle of death and rebirth.

As we approach the decade mark of that sea change event, the tower as a symbol is part of the new American mythology. It's hard to articulate exactly what it represents - feelings of unease, shattered security, obviously pain and suffering, but also of beautifully broken assumptions, minds forcibly opened, and the chance for something new to occur. That's some of it. Explaining the meaning of the Tower image is like defining a foreign word that doesn't quite translate. In "The Big Bang", Matt Relkin brings us as close to understanding as possible by quietly carrying the viewer into scenes of depleted hopelessness and then using the blank darkness therein to show the natural upswing - an explosive, bright spring after a tragic winter.

The Big Bang - New Works by Matt Relkin. Beep Beep Gallery. 696 Charles Allen Drive. Thru July 4. Hours Fri-Sun, 12 p.m. - 6 p.m.