



GAIL HILLOW WATKINS

cover: *Traces 2003*, mixed media
on shaped canvas, each panel 15" x 12"

Boyeaux, (detail), mixed
media on canvas, 2001



Gail Hillow Watkins is an artist of unusual talent and tenacity, whose icons and totems depend upon, of all things, the layering of as many as five or six layers of comics. The artist creates an unusually subtle and complex surface by sanding down the layers of paper, in some cases going so far as to penetrate to the other side, thus leaving holes to see through. Interestingly, the sum effect of Watkins' careful composition, abrasure, and then burnishing of her surface is reminiscent of a highly patterned imagery – the complex patternings of Islamic art comes to mind. Inasmuch as the surface bears the scars and blemishes of its distress, it is fair to say that her work presents a history of its making, a kind of chart in which the elements of her art, fiercely attacked by the artist, are reconfigured in a language that suggests both the passage of time and the irrevocably new.

In this way, Watkins has created a language suitable to her purposes of contemporary comment and clear-eyed recognition of the way an image is made. If it is true that art is a sum of destructions as much as it is a grouping of affirmations, then the very procedure by which Watkins addresses her concerns is representative of the creative process. A number of Watkins' canvases are shaped, so that they appear to be icons; the artist's self-conscious treatment of their form suggests that she has enlisted not only her own creativity but also a strong sense of art history in the construction of her memorable art. Additionally, the texture of Watkins' surfaces, which intimate the all-over patterning of the New York School, is dense with decisions about color and composition. Sometimes it is possible to see the actual imagery – the cartoon heads and speech balloons – of the comic-book illustrations she uses, and sometimes the imagery has been so worn away, or painted over, it proves impossible to see what she used from the start.



Glyphic, mixed media on shaped canvas, 20" x 11", 2002



Bayeaux, mixed media on canvas, 28" x 34", 2001

The surface, then, is dense with allusion. It appears the artist is so deeply involved in her method that she is capable of a certain sort of serial repetition, which involves the viewer in highly contemporary terms. It is difficult to originate a visual language that addresses both the past and the present, but Watkins does so by incorporating the imagery of the comics into her highly wrought compositions (this is not without humor: neighbors now support her art by passing on to her their copies of the Sunday funnies). There is even a biographical origin for the use of the comics — Watkins remembers her mother telling her that she demanded having the weekend comics read to her — so her decision to use such materials is not purely intellectualized or abstract. Inevitably, the comic-book imagery relates to the oversize images of the Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. So clearly, despite the would-be classicism of her patterns, Watkins is involved with the recent history of American, more particularly New York, art. Part of the work's strength stems from the specificity of such references.

In a work like *Traces* (2002), Watkins has arranged three rows of diamond-shaped canvases: the top row has three canvases; the middle row, four; and the bottom row, three. The surface of the canvases is composed of whirls, slight ridges, and gouged areas, so that it is as physically expressive as a fresco. And in *Nikopol Vase/Baltimore Sun* (2002), the artist has used images taken from the comics published by the Baltimore Sun, whose colors she claims are denser, more saturated than those of rival Washington Post. Whatever preferences Watkins may have, the result is art that references, in its very materials, the absolutely contemporary even as it suggests ancient iconic imagery from a distance. The viewer often proceeds like a detective in regard to her art, patiently working out the mechanics of her process. In this way, the artist gives us not only something to look at, but also something to think about. She asks of her audience both a serious gaze and a sense of humor. It is unusual for work to communicate by means of opposing involvements, but Watkins' clear command of her idiom rewards both the simple glance and the focused gaze, which both lend strength and intelligence to its appreciation.

Jonathan Goodman

Jonathan Goodman is an editor and writer based in New York. He writes for several publications, including *Art in America*, *Art on Paper*, *Sculpture*, and *Art Asia Pacific*.



Traces 2002,
mixed media on shaped canvas,
each panel 18" x 14"



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