

Art in America

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WENDELL GLADSTONE KRAVETS/WEHBY

A decade ago, the Los Angeles-based artist Wendell Gladstone was creating ensembles that paired a freestanding sculpture with a wall-hung figurative painting, connecting the two parts with string. These days his compositional alliances are forged in two dimensions, through paint alone. Chains, ropes and colored lines, or strands of objects (semaphores, pebbles, beads), wind through apparitional figures—of skeletons, chambermaids, vigilantes, sailors, raptors, serpents—interspersed with stretches of trippy patterns. And images are carried within images. In the manner of Lari Pittman, Gladstone makes you concentrate hard—you have to work to decipher and disentangle. Yet his meticulous surfaces offer a delicious read, yielding the guilty pleasures of fantasy novels, the concatenations of dreams.

Gladstone's last two shows at Kravets/Wehby, in 2010 and '11, were top notch. It's a small space, allowing for just a few paintings to be shown—a happy situation for work that abhors a vacuum. In the 2011 exhibition, the artist included four large paintings from this year, all acrylic on linen. At 7 by 15 feet, *C.A.B., Malthusian Solution* was the biggest. Gladstone's interweaving of images invites narrative readings; this one seems to concoct an allegory of bruised love. Stretching across nearly the entire length of the painting, and set against a striated sky, is a female figure wearing a Mexican hat; her blue foot emerges from a splintlike sheath of twigs, her swollen, pink big toe tightly bound by a thread attached to a romantic silhouette of a man and woman carried aloft by straw doves. A miniature marching band tromps across the big female's torso, composed of a riverine landscape. One of her arms is a black locomotive barreling downward; the other, human-form, is slung over a slumped male figure composed of white lacework, like that of a doily, tracing out smaller figures in shifting poses. Dangling in front of doily-man's head is a transparent yellow heart. Each representation is connected to the next by means of another representation; Gladstone makes his iconography do construction work. All the paintings convey a darkish spirit, ranging from

mordant to violent; one senses a master manipulator behind it all.

Another ghoulish couple appears in *Welcome Home* (84 by 60 inches). The main character is a naked man in a barrel, always a reliable trope for foolishness, grasped by the mere outline of a naked lady in a saucy pose. Her head is a grotesque Polynesian-style mask, while the man's bears a crown of twigs topped by a stack of stones. One can't help thinking *Ecce Homo*—or Llyn Foulkes. In *Ouroboros*, a poodle-skirted bobby-soxer is getting her mind blown, as her pigtailed head detaches from her body and rises to the top of a rainbow-hued sky. The transparent pink bubble she blows could be the cosmic egg; an all-seeing eye puts in an appearance. It's a hallucinatory enlightenment, to be sure, born of sly invention.

—Faye Hirsch



Wendell Gladstone:
Welcome Home, 2011,
acrylic on canvas, 84
by 60 inches;
at Kravets/Wehby.