

Bailey Scieszka
The Flesh Failures

Zurich 23 April - 4 June 2022

Many American artists of the early 19th century are called "pioneer", "primitive", or "folk". These artists were of varied backgrounds, mixed lineage and mixed aesthetic traditions, pragmatic and resourceful and, most importantly, highly mobile. Many of them, like Ammi Phillips (1788-1865), traveled throughout the young United States, capturing the age, sex, and social status of their subjects. Following a centuries' old limner tradition, their world was even characterized as "bizarre neomedievalism". This two-word combination is a definitional gift for discussing Bailey Scieszka's paintings and drawings.

Scieszka discovered Phillips's paintings via art and auction catalogues that she bought at estate sales. She learned how Phillips not only emphasized those things that his patrons considered important, but also how his works were under constant reconstruction, "evolving as he added or discarded what he found successful, while taking care to add personal details that spoke to the identity of those who hired him." As Stacy Hollander wrote

Phillips showed an early ability to fulfill the narrative elements mandated by portraiture before the age of photography, but interpreted the expected conventions through unusual choices of colors and atypical compositions.

Originality was not essential to a successful painting. Settings, props, costumes, and poses were often borrowed from other sources. Phillips's works are spare, but revealing, visual collages.

A few years ago, Scieszka created a project in Los Angeles—*Soul Dolphin*—at Park View / Paul Soto. It drew upon iconic 19th century American portraiture. It was her variety of "bizarre neomedievalism" at the intersection of fantasy and history, albeit American, rooted in the cultural, social, and political turmoil of the Trump era. Then, as now, Scieszka appropriated "pioneer" American portraiture, repainting persons and personalities, using commercial and fantastical imagery, creating new, almost unimaginable characters.

The exhibition's title was taken from signature song of the 1967 musical *Hair: Aquarius / Let the Sunshine In (The Flesh*

Failures). Scieszka's paintings and drawings, like the song, are paradoxical illustrations of joy and escape and pain and loss. Unlike the current, but hopefully waning trend, of Disney-meets-Magritte, saccharin-sweet surrealism, Scieszka's paintings are deliciously unconventional. She draws, paints, collages and, even, decorates her works like other "pioneer" artists. Her works are not only reflections of the times, but they also look directly at us, making us laugh and shudder with unease.

c.h.b.p.g.b.l.

Bailey Scieszka lives and works in Detroit. Scieszka has recently shown with Atlanta Contemporary, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Stems Gallery (Brussels), Rachel Uffner (New York), White Columns (New York), Maria Bernheim (Zürich), Larrie (New York), and What Pipeline (Detroit). Her work has been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, *Forbes*, *The New YorkTimes*, *Cura*, and *Cultured*. What Pipeline, a Detroit Gallery, recently published *More Heart Than Brains: The Collected Plays of Bailey Scieszka*.

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