



Robert Mango, *Amyss in The Abyss*, 1989, oil on canvas

Painter as Magician **Robert Mango at the Wimmer Gallery in New York City** **by Robert Mahoney**

Last winter I was asked to write the forward to an artist's book by veteran New York-based figurative painter Robert Mango. Mango was one of the pioneers of the brief-lived but vibrant Tribeca art scene in the mid-1980s, and as a reviewer for *Arts* magazine back then I reviewed several shows at his gallery, including his work. At the time I was intrigued by the breach of the conceptualist-abstract hegemony in the art world by the sudden outbreak of figuration, fed by four strands: Late 70s (now forgot) New Image painting; Picture theory leading by pictorial deconstruction and the entry of photography into the art world as art per se to a kind of photo-based painting too (of which Cindy Sherman is the queen, Jack Goldstein and Mark Tansey were the main picture painters); postpop art, stridently figurative, outrageously cynical (Mike Kelley and Jeff Koons, of course, the leading figures) combined with tons of East Village media postpop

art working through figuration in a myriad ways (David Sandlin, Rick Pro); and Neo-expressionism, which allowed, for a moment, for big figures (David Salle, Eric Fischl, Keith Haring) making big figures to dominate the scene—and then all kinds of other figures in spiderweb spaces in between all of the above. Such a moment for painterly figure in an art world before and since so generally preoccupied with a more abstract/conceptualist hygiene was exciting and intriguing for me: I wandered down many of the pathways connecting these isms, leading (as has come to pass) to some new broader art world where figure exists alongside of abstraction as part of the accepted vocabulary of contemporary art. Robert Mango's work, and the work of several artists he showed at his gallery, was located somewhere in that universe. But then, Mango, from Chicago, brought a robust entirely nonironic Pop Art faith in cultural heroes into his work, as well as a strong

dose of American Surrealism, mainly I associated him with the legacy of Louis O. Gugliemi and Peter Blume (whether or not these were direct influences was less a concern with me that trying to place the work). I tried again in my Forward to Mango's upcoming autobiographical book, *100 Paintings: An Artist's Life in New York City*. *New York: No Room For Doubt Inc.*; editor, Holly George-Warren, publication date, November 1, 2014), in which Mango in his own words recounts his pioneering days in Tribeca, to clarify where I place him. I am still not convinced that I have entirely succeeded, therefore gladly welcome any other point of view. It is fascinating therefore to look to New York-based curator Robert Curcio's selection of a small retrospective of some of Robert Mango's work over the course of his career opening in New York at Elga Wimmer on November 6. Curcio's take on Mango is somewhat different than mine (I get my chance, based on my Forward musings, in a more topical travelling show, *Rhapsody: The Urban Fantasy Paintings of Robert Mango, 1982-2003*, focusing on a body of work featuring New York City as its main character, that begins a tour

this winter). Curcio focuses on Mango's figurative representation of creativity itself in the body of the work. Mango represented the alter ego painter-as-magician in many works, most often in the form of a Jester, a classic figure from mythology which relates to the viewer as that part of the artist that is directly introducing to you the work and asking you to discuss (think of the classic Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* of a character in a movie that turns to the camera to address the viewer). The figure (sometimes appearing as a Samurai, sometimes a harlequin) "figures out" the act of painting itself in wide arcs of brush-fed paint. But he also opens the curtain, gives his step-this-way spiel, then leaves you to it, often with a sly smile (or a more gently sinister 'good luck with that!'). *Amyss in the Abyss* (1989) constitutes the painter as a fool figure, bodily, absurdly, with wild splashes of paint, trying to make meaning in the existential deep space of the universe. Curcio has cannily observed that this painterly-existential theme remains strong still

today in Mango's newer 3D works, as in *Strong Jester, Artist with Brushes and Warrior* (1998) (the additional irony in these works is that Mango has now devised a method of 3D sculpting that makes paint's role in it even more problematic). Furthermore, Curcio seems to hone in even more particularly on the fact that in this art the posture of jester is conveyed by not only the brush, but by the body as brush, in a series of almost *comedia dell'arte* bowing and prancing gestures that place the source of the creativity in the physical being and movement of the painter (a post-Pollock action painter ethos then). If you could say there is a gestalt in this selection, it is a zig-zag figure, body energized by the creative furor. This idea is not far removed from the Michelangeloesque baroque tradition in which body gestures and distortions were imbued with specific creative and philosophical meaning, to represent emotional states ranging from grace to pathos. Curcio's body art formalist take on Mango's work, as it were, makes it quite clear that body is

paint and vice versa. This also allows an insightful inclusion of Mango's treatment of the female form, which in an entirely non-objectifying way links up to her energy, agency and manner of address, as again exemplified in the wild zig-zag figure with flowing nymphlike hair (nymph referring to the mystique of a sacred space, best translated by that wonderful Old English word for "garment", 'girl') in *No Room For Doubt* (2012) (a theme further explored in equine form – Mango's vorticism transcends species – in *Runnin' Free*). For all of this, this retrospective is a succinct, compact, elegantly formal capturing of the core energy that has run unabated behind an ever-changing creative life from the 1980s to the present. Robert Mango, Nov 6 - 29 at Elga Wimmer PPC, 526 West 26 St, #310, with a book signing and a talk between Robert Mango and Robert Curcio on November 20. Exhibition or information inquires may be directed to Robert Curcio at curcioprojects@gmail.com.



Robert Mango, *No Room For Doubt*, 2012, oil on canvas over sculpted foam, polished aluminum frame, brass plate hair, 60" x 40" x 6"



Robert Mango, *The Strong Jester*, 1998, oil on canvas over sculpted foam, copper, 72" x 56" x 4"