

## Prayers for a Miracle

Written by Judith Malone  
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Steve Banks' monumental reliefs, which he calls "toy pieces," are distinguished by meticulous production and finishes that could have been done in a body shop. Some of these reliefs are being shown at the Peanut Gallery in Rock Island through May 10.

Mounted on tightly stretched canvases, a crucially smart decision, are thousands of objects, some found, some bought, and some made. Elements include carved wood, cigarette butts, junk mail, cardboard, stiffened fabric, and plastic toys. Exposed canvas is minimal, but hints of its texture make an earthy ground for satiny applied objects. A pleasing and uniform finish is achieved by repeated dustings of spray paint. Even cigarette butts are transformed into an elegant mosaic by the process. Occasional outbursts of the raw (see *Big Top Mask*) are nonetheless anchored by enticing finishes and seamless assembly.

Banks makes it look easy, and some might charge him with glibness and a certain superficiality. But look again. He taps into a theme near and dear to this reviewer's heart: the sacred object. The reliefs are magnified Milagros, or prayers for a miracle, narrative optional. His titles drip with meaning, and there is plenty of narrative opportunity for the storytellers. But it is the urgency and supplication in his frantic layering, captured and presented under a uniform skin, that make his reliefs work. See *Green Fields*, for example. Deceptively mannered in their sugary palette and smooth presentation, the reliefs are perfectly satisfying as surface. Banks is not the first artist to play in this field, and he won't be the last, but he is establishing a niche.

What Banks calls "paintings" are, well, paintings: oil on canvas that reveal painterly sophistication and an inclination to Expressionism laced with graphic punch. Banks must have paid attention to the slides in art school. One forebear that comes to mind is Gustav Klimt, the painter and draftsman. (See *Priestess*.) Banks puts paint where you want it to be. Once again, his surfaces, though flattened, still shine. His jewel-like palette is easy to digest and reflects formal training in graphic arts as well as what might be an innate talent for marketing.

It is interesting that his palette shifts radically when he exchanges the brush for the spray can, or vice-versa. I would call this an unresolved dichotomy, and the jury is still out on the importance of the resolution.

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Since there's very little left to discover out there, the 21st Century is shaping up to be the "Era of Application." Simply put, expect artists to reveal their sources and get comfortable with recycling, of ideas, materials, techniques, and points of reference. Then there is recombination, in which context is, deservedly, flushed down the toilet. Banks is working within a pair of traditions, the commercial and the fine, once thought to be mutually exclusive. But that is an old idea.

*The Peanut Gallery is open Saturdays from 1 to 3 p.m., Sundays from 3 to 5 p.m., and Wednesdays from 6 to 8 p.m. The gallery is located at 300 21st Street in Rock Island.*