

Ben Walmsley is Rich Little of 20th-century art world

These are strange times in the history of painting. The fallout from the neo-expressionist explosion of the early '80s is still settling so it's not clear yet what, if anything, is happening.

The incredible energy that characterized the return to figuration seems to have dissipated. In its place, we find a kind of restless casting around for something relevant and appropriate to the times. So far, their efforts have yielded little.

In the case of Ben Walmsley, whose paintings are on display at Garnet Press (580 Richmond St. W.) until Dec. 31, the search has led him to incorporating various art historical sources into his work. Titled *Representations Of Ecce Homo (1905—1990); A Retrospective Exhibit or The Return Of The Joking Jesus*, the show consists of about 15 pieces, each one painted in the style of famous 20th-century artists such as Juan Gris, Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, Josef Albers, Andy Warhol and Max Ernst.

There's no doubt that this is a clever, even witty, selection of paintings. Walmsley moves back



CHRISTOPHER HUME

Art

and forth between styles with obvious ease. One moment he's playing with the drips and blobs of Pollock's abstract expressionism, the next he's fooling around with Gris' cubism.

It makes for an entertaining exhibition if nothing else. What it does beyond that is debatable.

As the title of the show indicates, Walmsley's concerns lie as much with the Christian symbol of Jesus' final moment on the cross as with art history. He has painted the image as he (humorously) imagines some of the greats might have. The seriousness of Walmsley's efforts tends, however, to get lost in the playfulness of the paintings. His Pollock, for example, contains a hidden profile not of Jesus, but Popeye. You have to get back pretty far and look very closely but it's there amongst the splatters.

One of the most successful has to be his Ernst impression. Titled *Le Gentilhomme Celebre (1921)*, it transforms Jesus into one of those great amorphous blobs Ernst invented. The eyes become two holes, the mouth has been transplanted to the end of a long, tail-like appendage. Instead of a crown of thorns, the blob wears an umbrella.

In his Warhol send-up, he has taken an image of "Andy Boy," reversed it, and added a crown of thorns. Again, very clever, but to what end?

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Walmsley's show is the way it sums up the situation of contemporary painting. The rush to figurative imagery that began in the late '70s has apparently run out of steam. Now it seems every painter under 35 spends all his or her time reproducing the pictures they see in art history textbooks or popular magazines from the '50s. There are no new ideas, only old ones recycled.

Walmsley is certainly one of the more noteworthy young artists around. Known for his sculpture and painting, he brings much

thought and a healthy degree of facility to his work.

And yet despite their virtues, these paintings are too easily forgotten. They slip in and out of one's mind like a 10-second TV commercial. It is as if there is nothing left to painting but its past.



Recommended Viewing: *Outside (Elsewhere)*, a group exhibition at ARC (658 Queen St. W.) with paintings and installations by John Abrams, Andrew O1, Runt and Adly Gawad, shows just how glitzy the under-30 set is getting lately.

The works are big, brash and highly charged. Runt, the cartoonist, looks to be getting better and finally growing out of imitating Freak Brothers comics. Gawad, who never seems to paint anything bad, has contributed a dramatic installation that is visually dazzling. Also dazzling is Abrams' massive *Beached Whale*. Though he's done something strange to the beast's head — it's not there — the piece has great presence. Andrew O1's offering is a nicely executed walk down the garden path.