

# ARTFORUM

**Holly Coulis**

**LAMONTAGNE GALLERY**

**March, 2008**

In her sixth solo exhibition, “Some People,” Holly Coulis showed ten idiosyncratic portraits of invented characters. This group of oils on linen locates a group of oddball individuals—including a handwriting analyst, an animal trainer, a trout fisherman, a Puerto Rican pinup girl, and a male fan dancer—in situations of dreamlike ambiguity. A love of pattern, a bold palette, and a feeling for intricate design inform these works; the artist also employs a layered color and distorted scale and perspective. Once criticized for its haphazard, fragile technique, Coulis’s work is now distinguished by a relaxed balance of incisive draftsmanship and painterly modeling, studied finesse and happy accident.

Coulis’s scenarios and personalities are assembled with the help of a collection of magazine clippings, found photographs, images of folk art, and wallpaper patterns, as well as from her memories and observations of residents of Brooklyn, New York (where she lives and works). The artist is unapologetic about any perceived nods to Manet, Picasso, Balthus, or Alex Katz in her use of areas of raw color, manipulation of depth, unconventional cropping, and fusion of simplified abstract forms with recognizable naturalistic imagery.

Animal Trainer, 2007, is only one of several canvases pairing eccentric-looking people with domestic or wild animals. A hairless, beady-eyed circus trainer, sporting an elegant red, white, and blue costume, smiles in a self-satisfied manner, seemingly oblivious to a fearsome brown bear baring teeth and claws behind him. The trainer’s sharply defined features and polished appearance seem at first out of place in the loosely painted autumnal landscape. But think of the beast as representing the man’s pent-up emotions, and the juxtaposition might make a little more sense.

Snowball, 2007, features an adorable white domestic cat with one gold eye and one blue, reclining proudly in front of its darkly rendered and reserved-seeming female “master.” Dressed in a long cloak whose striations blend with the brown and black streaks in her hair, the stern green-eyed owner is lost in reverie. Her severe profile stands out against livelily patterned wallpaper. The cat seems more comfortable with being watched than does its enigmatic custodian. Animals are absent from The Fan, 2007, but combinations of pattern, color, and shape inform and reflect one another here, too. A young man in a loose-fitting striped brown suit poses against densely patterned curtains. Arms crossed defensively over his chest, the effeminate black-haired subject holds an elaborate striped fan in his right hand, his apparent calm countered by the visual excitement of his setting.

“Some People” was an operatic grouping of otherworldly characters lifted out of time and dressed for the occasion. Coulis manages to convey an extraordinary empathy for these fringe characters despite their entirely imaginary existence, capturing their visible quirks and hidden tragedies with subtlety and optimism.

—Francine Koslow Miller