

Bo Joseph:
A Mutation of Differences,
2009, acrylic,
tempera and
gesso on cloth,
68 7/8 by 50 7/8
inches; at
Sears Peyton.



BO JOSEPH
SEARS PEYTON

The seven large paintings and 20 mixed-medium works on paper by California-born New York artist Bo Joseph in this show, all produced in the past two years, are colorful, richly textured abstractions combined with figurative elements—all silhouettes made with stencils. Set against milky white backgrounds, the silhouettes, resembling heads or masks, human limbs, animal shapes and sometimes full-length figures, activate the multilayered surfaces. To begin the process in a characteristic painting such as *Cult of the Persistent Absence*, Joseph applies many layers of brilliantly hued gestural markings, and layers of acrylic, tempera and gesso. He then literally washes the canvas, leaving traces of texture and flashes of contrasting and interacting colors. After this stage, he places the stencils on the surface and overlays a whitewash. When the stencils are removed, the white areas become the negative spaces as the vibrant, multicolored silhouettes glow against the cloudy ground.

In *A Mutation of Differences*, one of the most striking works in the show, two large silhouettes of faces, whose angular

features recall African masks, command the space at the left. Connected to each other by a thick, vertical band of color, the reddish masks are compositionally balanced on the right by a kind of scaffolding of diagonal lines in deep blues and maroon that yield a variety of shapes, including reptilian heads with open mouths and diminutive shrouded figures. Issuing from one of these figures, a long lance dramatically traverses the composition to pierce the base of one of the masks. The tilted head near the top of *Primal Ambiguity* is similarly linked by a thick passage of color to an array of silhouettes, including abstracted figures reminiscent of traditional African sculptures.

Joseph's technique is remarkably consistent in the large canvases (over 5 feet high), as well in the exquisite 12-by-9-inch works on paper. The more crowded compositions on paper center on easily identifiable human forms amid a plethora of more elusive silhouettes. A suspended figure with bent legs and high-heeled shoes, the focus of one work, is surrounded by horse and bird profiles, whose small size suggests toys. In another piece, birds dominate the top half of the composition, which shows a figure standing under an umbrella in a piazza-like space that extends toward a shimmering horizon line. In the smaller works, the artist leaves less to chance than in the larger pieces, but with surprising juxtapositions of form and prismatic color, he manages to effectively animate these intimate and quixotic scenarios.

—Gerard McCarthy