



Bull Market,
etching by
Eric Petersen

Playfully Absurd

Eric Petersen's seductive visual puns

Bright joyous colors, folksy characters, absence of perspective and deliberately naïve renderings confer at first glance a childlike quality to Eric Petersen's hand-colored etchings and gouaches at the White Lotus Gallery through Dec. 4. This impression is never negated with subsequent viewings yet is subverted at every turn, which makes for a much more interesting, if at times unsettling, exploration.

Printmaker Petersen is a punsmith. To describe the genesis of his works, it suffices to quote Samuel Beckett's Murphy: "In the beginning was the pun."

Puns rely on homonyms, words that sound the same and may even be spelled identically but possess different meanings. A punster thinks on two planes at once and in punning makes two or more levels of meanings coexist, or at least alternate, as in figure-ground reversals. Puns give us a fresh look at language and remind us of its ambiguity and arbitrariness. They're also playfully absurd, with a penchant for irreverence and the potential for transgression. They can be a source of poetry and insight when the unex-

pected merging of two competing references opens up a new perspective.

Puns are present in Petersen's visual images, which are born of a wide range of verbal associations. Such verbal origins are often made explicit in the work's title, as in the etching *Sheep of Fools*, which features a sheep steering the large wheel of a boat.

In *Hooked on Flyfishing Again?* Petersen relies for inspiration on the various meanings of the title words and their thematic associates, which leads to the pursuit of several intersecting paths. The associative process is not linear but tends to branch into tangents. Thus the word "fly" leads to a butterfly, a reference to *Lord of the Flies* and fishing lures of peacock-feathers.

"Fish" spawns a fishing-net pattern, a fish dish, a rainbow trout that in death becomes a rainbow, a zodiac sign (Pisces) and a symbol of Christianity, which leads tangentially to a reference to the rising of Christ ("He rose"), out of which a visual pun is born: a climbing rosebush.

Bull Market uses verbal and visual associations with the word "bull" from a bull-elephant to a Viking entering the bullfight scene

on the strength of his bull-horned helmet. References to such artists as Goya and Picasso, who also dealt with this theme, further enriches the network of associations. Meanwhile, some puns indulge unabashedly in the purely frivolous, as with the "two-tired" matador on a bicycle.

Other works are more enigmatic, as when the source of Petersen's imagery reaches deep into his own psychology in a process of self-analysis. For example, the complex third panel of *Flight of the Moth Triptych* reminds us of the limits to what we may share of our own psyche.

Ultimately, however, it matters little how well we follow the artist's train of thoughts, because when we look at Petersen's etchings, we are faced foremost with a visual whole. The logic of visual composition provides a new order and structure to elements born of wordplay or psychological probing. Out of the compositional integrity of the visual scenes, viewers supply new narratives. Petersen delightfully fosters a plurality of interpretation by maintaining a high level of ambiguity.

His is a seductive world. Bright colors beckon. An element of surrealism and magic enchants. A cast of anthropomorphized animals, hybrid creatures and folk-tale charac-

ters such as mermaids and Gingerbread Man recur. Sometimes this world is purely whimsical, as in *A Sheep at the Wheel*, *Three Rings for the Family Tree* and *King & Queen of Eggs*. But more often, there is a subversive side. Gingerbread Man wears horns, or appears with a cookie in his belly — the result of a cannibalistic act.

Religious imagery and symbolism abound, often with a transgressive twist. *Sowing Hearts of Lions* features a "naughty angel," a monkey with wings, breasts and ambiguous genitals. A moose plays "bingo and jackpot the way they're always doing in churches," in the artist's words. The bingo game displays birds and bees, and the jackpot is a cherub. *Angel-Food Cake* offers a similarly rich mix of religious and sexual imagery, albeit in a lighter vein. *Santa's Last Supper or a Carpenter's Nightmare* is a spoof on Christ's last supper, in which Santa sits in for Jesus. Three angels on a pin are "persecuting" a sheep caught between a saw-toothed shark and a hammerhead shark.

All these works share an innocent look, which disarms and charms, despite the underlying complexity of the themes. Petersen's highly idiosyncratic work deserves savoring. **EW**



Don't Try To Catch a Rainbow with a Butterfly,
etching by
Eric Petersen

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