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REVIEWS OCT. 20, 2016

Sadie Benning

NEW YORK,
at Mary Boone and Callicoon

by Tatiana Istomina



Sadie Benning: *Mayflower Now*, 2015,
mixed mediums and wood, 66 by 90 inches;
at Mary Boone.

Sadie Benning's exhibition "Green God" took over Callicoon Fine Arts on the Lower East Side and Mary Boone in Midtown with two dozen works (all 2015 or 2016) that hover ambiguously between sculpture and painting. Each was constructed from various fitted-together pieces of jigsaw-cut wood covered with layers of resin, casein, and acrylic sanded to a matte, leathery-looking finish. The works have a graphic appearance and the rich tactility of children's toys but allude to a complicated subject: the ways in which collective belief manifests in contemporary society, from religious practices to secular phenomena like commodity fetishism and celebrity worship.

The exhibition title was announced in green neon lights in the window of Callicoon; inside the gallery, the show's eponymous painting greeted viewers with bulging eyes and a gaping mouth on a rudimentary face. Across the room was *The Crucifixion*, which shows a crude blue female figure on a black cross, silhouetted against a glowing red ground. A smaller piece, *Nature*, features three ambiguous white and red shapes in a stark black field, surrounded by a flurry of small white specks—the unclear but dimly threatening imagery suggesting an animal fight or a human face spattered in blood. In the all-red *Guts*, coiling forms resemble intestines. The simplistic, vaguely archaic imagery throughout the works brings to mind human sacrifices and Old Testament curses and combines with the sculptural quality of the panels—which evoke Mesopotamian bas reliefs or clay tablets—to produce a powerful and disquieting effect. Religious tones are perceptible even in pieces like *Mic*, which depicts a long-haired figure, presumably a rock musician, behind a mic, and *Crowd*, in which concertgoers, standing en masse, appear like vague clones of one another.

The second part of the exhibition, at Mary Boone, contained more elaborate works, many of them incorporating found objects and imagery that added historical and political allusions to Benning's exploration of the sacred. In the main room, seven works were hung close together, creating a composite image that could be read sequentially, as with a polyptych altarpiece. Five of these pieces display rudimentary figures or faces representing various gods, while the other two feature digital reproductions of details of historical artworks (a print and a painting) showing American pilgrims. The seven-part sequence appeared as an allegorical depiction of American history, with the multicolored pantheon of Native American gods being succeeded by the spirit of gold (as indicated by the yellow circles in the pilgrim works, one of which is titled *Coin*) and by religious intolerance (as conveyed by *Grey God*, which depicts the face of a figure with sharp teeth and a forehead stamped with a cross).

The photographic images in Benning's compositions are mounted on their own jigsaw pieces, and generate considerable pictorial tension with the simple, brightly colored forms that surround them. Even stronger and more complicated effects are produced in the works that include physical objects: small figurines, sculptures, or toys placed on narrow white shelves locked within the puzzles. In *Soccer Jesus*, for example, a green expanse crisscrossed with two white bands—suggesting both an Ellsworth Kelly and a portion of a sports field—features not only an old color photograph of a deep-sea diver but also a wooden bust of Jesus. In the best of Benning's assemblages, the disparate elements merge to create a quasi-cinematic effect, with the juxtaposition of images pointing toward potential narratives and their resolutions, and the interplay of surface and volume, texture and shadow, abstract pattern and solid form providing a powerful sensory experience.

Since first making videos at age fifteen, with a Fisher-Price toy camera, Benning has developed a personal, idiosyncratic body of work. These newest sculpture-paintings demonstrate an impressive capacity for material innovation and an ability to address complex subjects using economical means.