

ARTFORUM

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Arnold Mesches LIFE ON MARS



Arnold Mesches, *Eternal Return 7*, 2013, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 20 x 21". From the series "Eternal Return," 2013–14.

Arnold Mesches had his first solo show in 1947, and according to the Life on Mars Gallery website, he has by now had 124 of them, which perhaps gives a new meaning to this one's title, "Eternal Return." The exhibition included selections from three series of paintings, "Coming Attractions," 2003–2007; "SHOCK AND AWE," 2011; and "Eternal Return," 2013–14. As a title, "Coming Attractions" recalls the fact that Mesches, who spent most of his career in Los Angeles before moving to New York in 1984, worked in the film industry in the 1940s and '50s. The first work in the series (not in this show) took a grandiose, old-fashioned movie theater as its setting; projected on the screen is a scene of three waiters in an otherwise empty restaurant set out with white tablecloths, as if its clientele were about to turn up any minute—indeed, as if the filmgoing audience they are facing were the arriving guests. But there is no audience in the painting; the vast theater is just as empty as the restaurant, although the film is rolling. One might speak of a spectacle playing only to itself. The theater is as unreal as the images that pass through it. And the whole series should probably be seen with this idea in mind, that they are, albeit painted, scenes from a film being projected on the big screen of the mind; transitory yet haunting frames from a dystopian cinema. My favorite work in this series is *Coming Attractions 17*, 2005; with its ghoulish, rather James Ensor-esque little brass band inexplicably tooting away in the woods, it quietly manages to fulfill the artist's desire "to recreate the sense of utter instability and sheer insanity that I feel continues to permeate my years."

The "SHOCK AND AWE" paintings up the ante on insanity and instability but otherwise could well be playing in the same theater—so long as the movie palace itself were in flames to match the scenes on view. A good formalist might call these paintings a set of variations on red, yellow, and black. The stark, frenzied radiance of vast fires turns everything else in these scenes into a charred black shadow of itself. The series' title may suggest that these blazing paintings are set in Iraq, but any details that might have established a specific location have apparently gone up in smoke. Instead, the works evoke a kind of universal destructiveness, an apocalypse made in the USA, perhaps, but exportable anywhere and replicable on any scale, from that of a single car in *SHOCK AND AWE 5*, 2011, to what seems to be cities piled on cities piled on cities in *SHOCK AND AWE 23*, 2011.

The works Mesches calls "Eternal Return" are of two distinct types. In the earlier ones, he creates sort of Frankenstein cityscapes by collaging painted pieces of different scenes onto canvas; the first two are, as far as we can tell, absent of human inhabitants—as if the fires of the "SHOCK AND AWE" paintings had died away but their sites had been abandoned. In *Eternal Return 3*, however, there is a faceless crowd—but is this the exodus of the masses from the city (it's the New York skyline, pre-9/11, in the background) or return? It's impossible to tell. The subsequent works in the series are devoted to this horde, now without any determinate setting. They are ghostly—the living dead. Mesches's vision of human folly is undeniably grim, yet the gusto with which he throws himself into its depiction suggests there is a way out, if only we could see it. —Barry Schwabsky