

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2009

WASHINGTON, DC

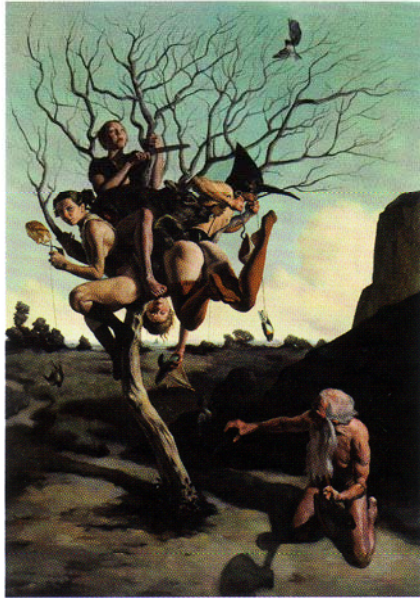
Erik Thor Sandberg CONNER CONTEMPORARY ART

Erik Thor Sandberg's six richly sculptural, masterfully executed figurative paintings in "Cyclical Nature" feature compositions both witty and, with their flagrant nudity, engagingly confrontational. More psychologically probing and viscerally introspective than the works in his 2006 show, "Contrary"—in which nearly nude figures represented vanity, vice, and virtue—these paintings are among his strongest to date, and possess a painterly finish on par with the work of Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin.

Sandberg has made, and continues to make, drawings and small-scale paintings depicting individuals in odd maquillage taunting one another. Signifying the toils, torments, and sometimes the joys of life, these buffoonish and occasionally revolting encounters recall the treatment of parables and personifications of human folly by sixteenth-century Netherlandish artists like Bosch and Bruegel. Sandberg's large-scale works eschew such caricature, pursuing more nuanced examinations of situation and emotion. Human figures, mostly female, are featured either alone or in small groups, with vividly rendered facial expressions that often suggest psychological isolation.

The new, thematically richer works on display here take psychological realism to new heights in the painter's oeuvre. Made in the wake of Sandberg's father's death, they express the artist's awareness of human

REVIEWS



Erik Thor Sandberg,
Swing, 2009, oil on
canvas, 92 x 66".

others not? What will life bring next?

In *Fleet*, a woman seated on a grassy, daisy-covered mound straps a rabbit to her right foot like a roller skate. The concentrated gaze on her face, rendered with the doughy muscularity of a Jan Gossart Madonna, underscores her misguided deliberateness in pursuing life's follies.

Age is pitted against youth in *Swing*, in which an old man—bearded and clad in only a loincloth, resembling a Saint Jerome by Jusepe de Ribera—prepares to take an ax to a dead tree. Four young adults cling to its branches, each teen wearing an expression of complete self-absorption, apparently oblivious to the danger that awaits. They each hold on to objects that might represent the complications of their lives: a toy sailboat signifying the joys and traumas of childhood; a saw for building or cutting one's losses; and a fluttering bird tethered to a string, standing for the inability to escape and start anew. In the end, however, Father Time will chop down the tree and their lives will be over, rendering earthly trifles meaningless.

Lest the show be too morose, Sandberg strikes a remarkable balance, offsetting the atmosphere of melancholy and his depictions of flawed human nature with rich, provocative renderings of the nude—a celebration of the human form. As he recently noted, "I love to paint flesh."

—Nord Wennerstrom

folly and his sense of helplessness in the face of mortality. In the past, Sandberg's tableaux were set within neutral interiors, but "Cyclical Nature" finds its subjects within landscapes, which, the artist says, "convey the idea of the passage of time better than any interior space can."

Course (all works 2009) features four teens on a leafy knoll with a mountainous backdrop. Two of the girls, apparently dead, lie side by side with a sapling growing from each of their stomachs; Sandberg appears to touch upon death's relationship to rebirth and regeneration, just as Anselm Kiefer does in *Man Lying with Branch*, 1971, a small watercolor depicting a tree growing from a man's chest. A remaining girl stands in a *contrapposto* pose between the two trees, while her companion, a boy, crouches near one of the prone girls. The expressions of both indicate anxiety, unease, and vulnerability. Why are they alive and the