

William Villalongo: *Les Desmoiselles d'Brooklyn*, 2010, acrylic, paper and velvet flocking on wood panel, 24 inches square; at Susan Inglett.



WILLIAM VILLALONGO SUSAN INGLETT

The paintings in William Villalongo's exhibition, understatedly titled "Bathing Nymph," depict quasi-naturalistic playgrounds of decadence and depravity, combining so many references and symbols from so many genres and sources that it would be difficult to inventory them all. Suffice it to say that in the 14 variously shaped, Rococo-derived paintings (all 2010) the overarching impression is of art history colliding with comic-book art, with the politics of race and sexuality as a constant underpinning. Is this a grim view of contemporary existence intertwined with a glimpse into the psychological and political machinations of a predominately white, male art world, or is it an irreverent romp through a similar environment? Are the shaped canvases or the figures who wear masks made of

miniature modern paintings—suggesting, for example, an Ellsworth Kelly fan or a Kenneth Noland target—meant to signify some sort of stylistic, formal debate? (At the show's opening, women wearing similar masks wandered through the crowd, to dramatic but uncertain effect.) Questions permeate these provocative works, which probe the contemporary status quo through visions of alternate realities where almost anything goes.

Each painting has a painted border of black foliage that surrounds the central scenes, which are lit up in hot, bright colors. The sharp edges of the foliage recall influences as diverse as Matisse's cutouts and the silhouettes of Kara Walker, the latter association imbuing Villalongo's pastoral scenes with suggestions of violence and exploitation. The cavorting nude women in *Moon Dance* recall Chris Ofili's representations of romantic interludes under moonlit skies, and certainly Villalongo's figures exude a degree of lassitude and joy despite the suggestion of bad things to come. *BBQ By The Lake* does not exactly whet the appetite, as dinner looks to be a roasted male figure impaled on a spit, and yet this gruesome detail doesn't seem to put a damper on the fun. A thin vibrant rainbow arches across a blue sky as if in cheerful affirmation of the festivities below.

Intriguing as all this may be, the viewer may wonder what the artist is getting at. The depth of his undertaking invites investigation, but the clues don't always lead to comfortable conclusions.

—Amanda Church