



## AFLOAT IN DREAM TOWN

Gary Panter muses on movies, hippies, and more

TEXT BY SCOTT INDRISEK | PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

PANTER'S MOST RECENT show of paintings at Fredericks & Freiser in New York was called "Dream Town"—a title that could refer both to the array of surrealist weird scenes depicted in the works and to his own home studio, located in an unexpectedly idyllic, quasi-suburban corner of Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. It's there that Panter—whose résumé includes everything from underground comics like "Jimbo" to a set-designer role on *Pee-wee's Playhouse*—keeps an attic studio, chockablock with rolled canvases, toys, small sculptures-

in-progress, and innumerable other artifacts. When I visit, the room is full of paintings that appropriate imagery from schlocky movies, repurposing buff men, heroic women, and the occasional dinosaur atop washes of abstract gesture or vivid blocks of solid pastel colors. ("Sometimes I think I'm trying to be a British Pop artist," Panter jokes.)

While the artist is loath to impart a narrative through his paintings—*vague* is an adjective he uses often, to positive effect, along with *goofy* and *loony*—he admits that there is a certain maritime

theme flowing through the newest works. One features figures marooned in the ocean, grasping at an upturned rowboat. Another depicts a few men sporting 1970s porn-worthy mustaches and peacocking in front of a ship. *Pigboat* shows two submarine commanders inspecting a deceptively realistic-looking periscope-like device: "Technically, a sub guy would not be impressed," Panter says. "But people who like shapes might like it." The artist culls his imagery from movie lobby cards, less concerned with the action depicted than with the composition:





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:  
Pages from a book-in-progress called *Songy in Paradise*, a satirical retelling of Milton's *Paradise Regained*.

*Lost World*, an acrylic-on-canvas painting.

Panther's CDs, arranged by genre.

*Borrowed*, 2013, one of several recent paintings with a maritime theme.

A selection of love beads. "I'm making concrete poetry with them as part of a project considering the dreams of hippies (and not the nightmares of hippies)," Panter says.

A shelf full of toys. "My father ran dime stores," the artist explains. "Some of these are from the store he had in Brownsville, Texas in the '50s."



BOTTOM RIGHT: FREDERICKS & FREISER, NEW YORK



RIGHT:  
A series of small studies, "paint tests, and experiments," says Panter. They hang in front of the studio's rather unique wallpaper.

BELOW, FROM LEFT:  
"These are mounted boom boxes that, when played simultaneously, provided the soundtrack for my small light show installation in the late '90s in my Williamsburg studio, later installed and performed at Pierogi Gallery in the early 2000s," Panter says.

A page from a notebook where Panter is gathering ideas for a future hippie-themed project. "I listed things I did and didn't like about the '60s," he says. "About 200 pages of these notes are to be published as a book, part of a program of object-making and installations on this theme."



"I don't want the subject matter to get in front of the goofy formal things I'm doing." Panter's style is decidedly at home within Fredericks & Freiser's stable: indebted to stalwarts like John Wesley, and obviously influential to a younger generation of artists, such as Keegan McHargue. Other people Panter loves: Karl Wirsum ("one of the best painters of the 20th century, in my peculiar rating system") and Ed Ruscha ("he really said something about the Western landscape with the format of his paintings"). One artist Panter hates, unexpectedly: Anselm Kiefer.

In addition to painting, Panter has been keeping busy with comics—he used a recent 10-month residency at the New York Public Library to start an adaptation of Milton's *Paradise Regained*. He's in a psych-rock band, Devin Gary & Ross, for which he plays guitar and sings. He regularly collaborates with Joshua Smith, an icon of the 1960s light-show scene whom Panter met via his own series of low-tech, DIY light shows that he was putting on in alternative spaces and galleries in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in the late '90s. (Last fall they provided live visuals for bands including Television and the Bad Plus at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts in New York.)

And in keeping with that Summer of Love vibe, Panter is brainstorming a larger installation conceived around the idea of the hippie—a countercultural figure that, as a boy growing up in a tiny Texas town in a very Christian family, he first experienced through magazines. So far the flower-child elements include beaded necklaces spelling out sets of words (Frank Zappa album titles, for instance). Panter has also been buying Indian woodblocks in order to make his own hippie-inflected fabrics, "a misuse—my own shitty version of Indian prints." But all of these small pieces are just possible notes in a more comprehensive installation, one that he partially likens to Jonah Freeman, Justin Lowe, and Alexandre Singh's immersive "Hello Meth Lab in the Sun." He's applying for grants. "The problem with hippies is they're such a horrible cliché, and nostalgic," he says. "It's very dangerous territory to goof around in." Other touchstones he's thinking about: Navajo roadside stands, the charmingly ramshackle living rooms of hippies he has known, the signage of discount gas stations. "In a sketchbook, one should train oneself to think big," counsels Panter, flipping through several volumes of sketches, notes, and lists. "Like: 'We'll hollow out a boulder and put a head shop in it!' Lunatic stuff." MP

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