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 Prudence Peiffer on **Saira McLaren**

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 Lauren O'Neill-Butler on **Yael Bartana**

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Normal, IL

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Normal, IL Reviews

Walter Robinson

UNIVERSITY GALLERIES OF ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY



Walter Robinson, *Bidlo*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30".

As Walter Robinson's paintings have evolved, they've come to serve as an uncannily accurate gauge for the American art world's analogously shifting, and increasingly nuanced, attitudes toward consumerism and mass culture. The artist's early-1980s works—straightforward depictions of drugstore purchases, Budweiser beer cans, a plastic My Little Pony figurine, and Robinson's personal friends, the artists Martin Wong and Mike Bidlo and critic Carlo McCormick—feature banal subjects facetiously scumbled in acrylic paint and initially registered as an ironic wink to the viewer. The portraits possessed enough verisimilitude to crosswire neo-expressionism's value systems, thus achieving a knowing postmodern position to which much of the '80s New York art world (in which Robinson was heavily involved as an artist and critic) aspired. Yet today, these same paintings look remarkably earnest. Even works featuring unabashedly clichéd subjects—large-scale representations of bright-eyed kittens and children's plush toys—register to the contemporary viewer as evidence of the artist's passion for the medium.

The show, an exhilarating array of ninety-four paintings, was organized by Barry Blinderman, director of University Galleries and a colleague of Robinson's since 1980 (the year they met through the artist's collective Colab in New York). For this exhibition, the artist's first museum survey, Blinderman selected and installed paintings thematically, avoiding chronological organization and therefore eschewing the rote display of the evolving technical dexterity that inevitably comes from a thirty-five-year commitment to the medium. He instead focused on Robinson's engagement with the psychology of mass consumption by grouping and juxtaposing related subjects and genres.

The largest of the five galleries featured a wall installed with iconic toiletry paintings, which ranged from a monumental depiction of body moisturizer titled *Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion*, 1984, to an equally majestic blue-and-green jar from the same year, titled *Vicks Vaporub*. The gallery also displayed four viscosely rendered cheeseburger paintings (all 2012), two abstractly articulated plates of Chinese food (both 1994), and a miscellany of paintings spanning Robinson's career portraying frontal views of whiskey bottles, cigarettes, pastries, and painkillers. Among the array of daily consumables, each brand betrays its particular cultural narrative. The large 1984 painting of a bottle of Bromo-Seltzer, an analgesic banned from pharmacy shelves in the '70s owing to the toxic tranquilizers included among its ingredients, stands out for its subject's checkered consumer history. But for the most part, Robinson's commonplace sundries add up to a collection of classless readymades that dodge the consumer fetishism exploited by Jeff Koons, without conversely offering even a token free-market critique. Instead, an impressionistically painted box of

- Nengudi**
Sherman Sam on **Nick Mauss**
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Declan Long on **Eoin Mc Hugh**
- Paris**
Mara Hoberman on **David Malek**
- Berlin**
Alexander Scrimgeour on **Nikita Kadan**
John Beeson on **"American Producers"**
- Lingen, Germany**
Jens Asthoff on **Marieta Chirulescu**
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Daniel Horn on **Wu Tsang**
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Paola Nicolin on **Paolo Icaro**
- Naples**
Pier Paolo Pancotto on **Seb Patane**
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Neringa Černiauskaitė on **Nina Canell**
- Barcelona**
Javier Hontoria on **Jochen Lempert**
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Kate Sutton on **Julije Knifer**
- Istanbul**
Mine Haydaroglu on **Akram Zaatari**
- Athens**
Stephanie Bailey on **Alex Hubbard and Jon Pestoni**
- Beijing**
Fiona He on **"Unlived by What Is Seen"**
- New Delhi**
Ryan Holmberg on **Shambhavi Singh**
- São Paulo**
Kaira M. Cabañas on **Melanie Smith**
- Recife, Brazil**
Sarah Lookofsky on **Cristiano Lenhardt**

tampons or a graphically contoured container of French fries evokes an empathetic relationship to the routine of daily consumption.

Some early paintings, copies from midcentury pulp-romance cover illustrations, were aptly juxtaposed with a grid of nine spin paintings dating from the mid-'80s, a reminder that Robinson had explored these painterly devices before Damien Hirst and Richard Prince laid claim to them. In another similarly voluminous gallery, a compelling mix of '80s portraits depicting loosely rendered demi-celebrities of the East Village scene comingled with a selection of recent small paintings of online selfies. Robinson's portraiture grapples with photography's relationship to painting: Using photographic references when developing product taxonomies and still lifes seems a practical decision, yet deploying the camera for portraiture reduces the depicted individuals to image and sign. Exhibited together, person and product are depicted as equally uniform. Robinson's accomplishment, besides shaping New York's critical apparatus through his affiliations with influential publications such as *Art-Rite* and the *East Village Eye*, as well as Artnet's influential online magazine, lies in his exuberant dedication to representational painting, even as his subject matter and use of photographs complicate his painterly stance. Over the course of three decades, he has honed an approach to painterly imagemaking, in which a scrupulously painted cheese Danish can elicit profound emotional responses from viewers.

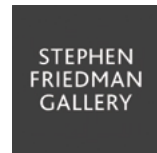
—Michelle Grabner

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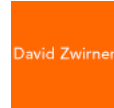
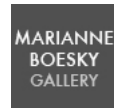
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