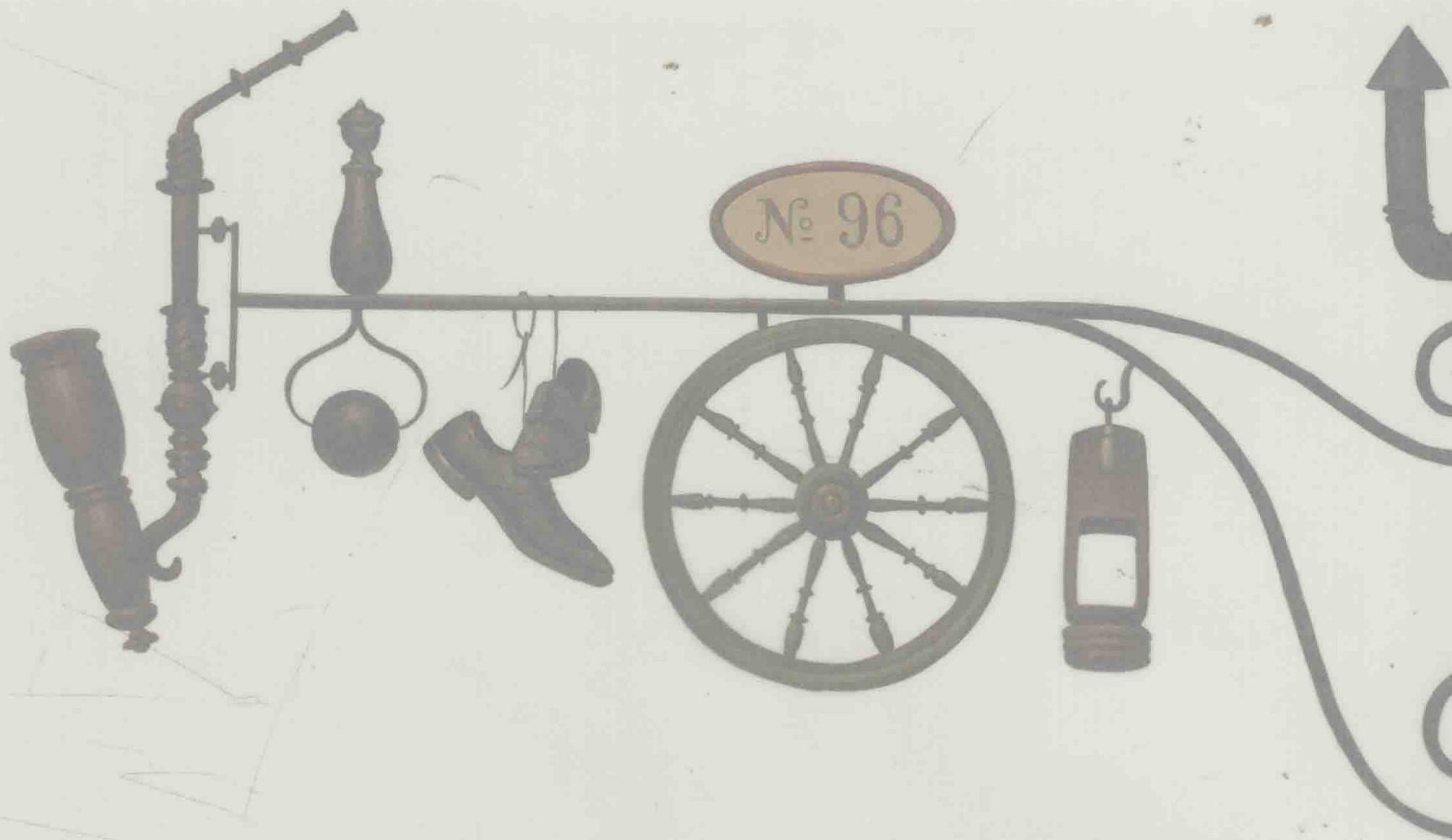


MARK RYDEN



THE GAY 90'S

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK



THE GAY 90'S

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藏书章

MARK RYDEN

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

MICHAEL KOHN GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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THE GAY 90'S

MARK RYDEN

SPECIAL THANKS

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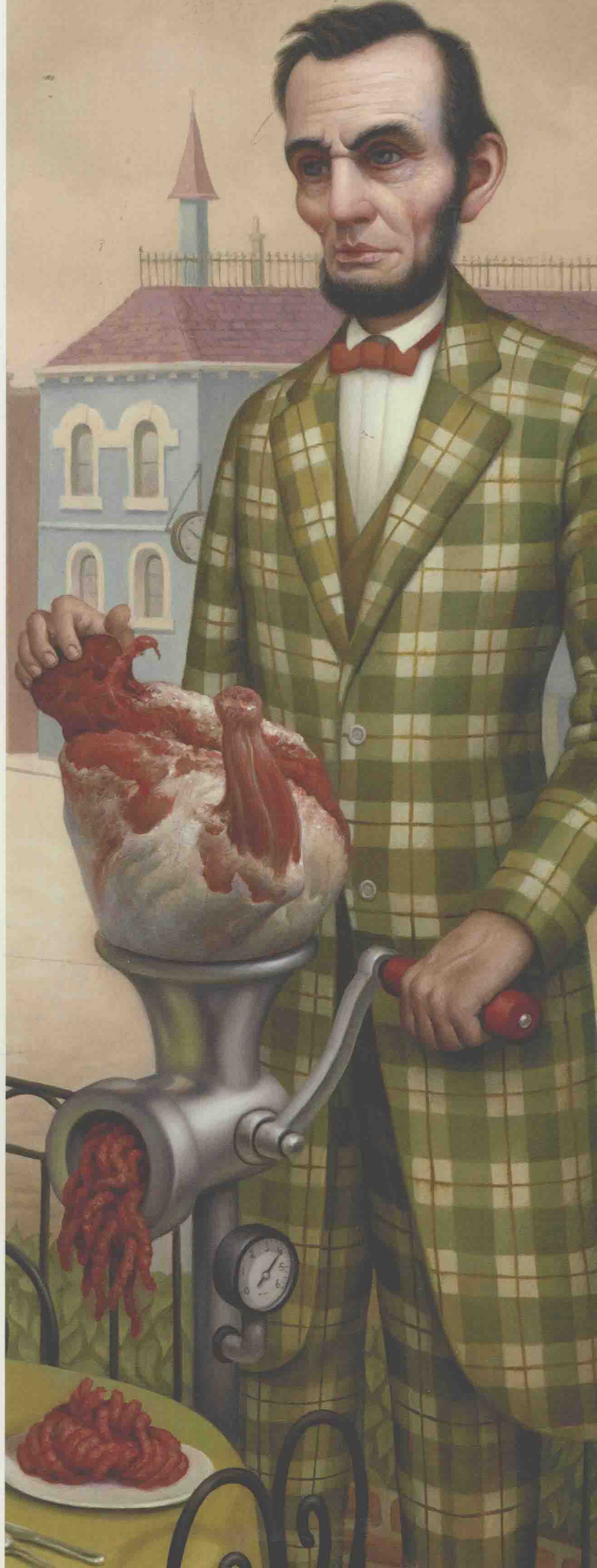
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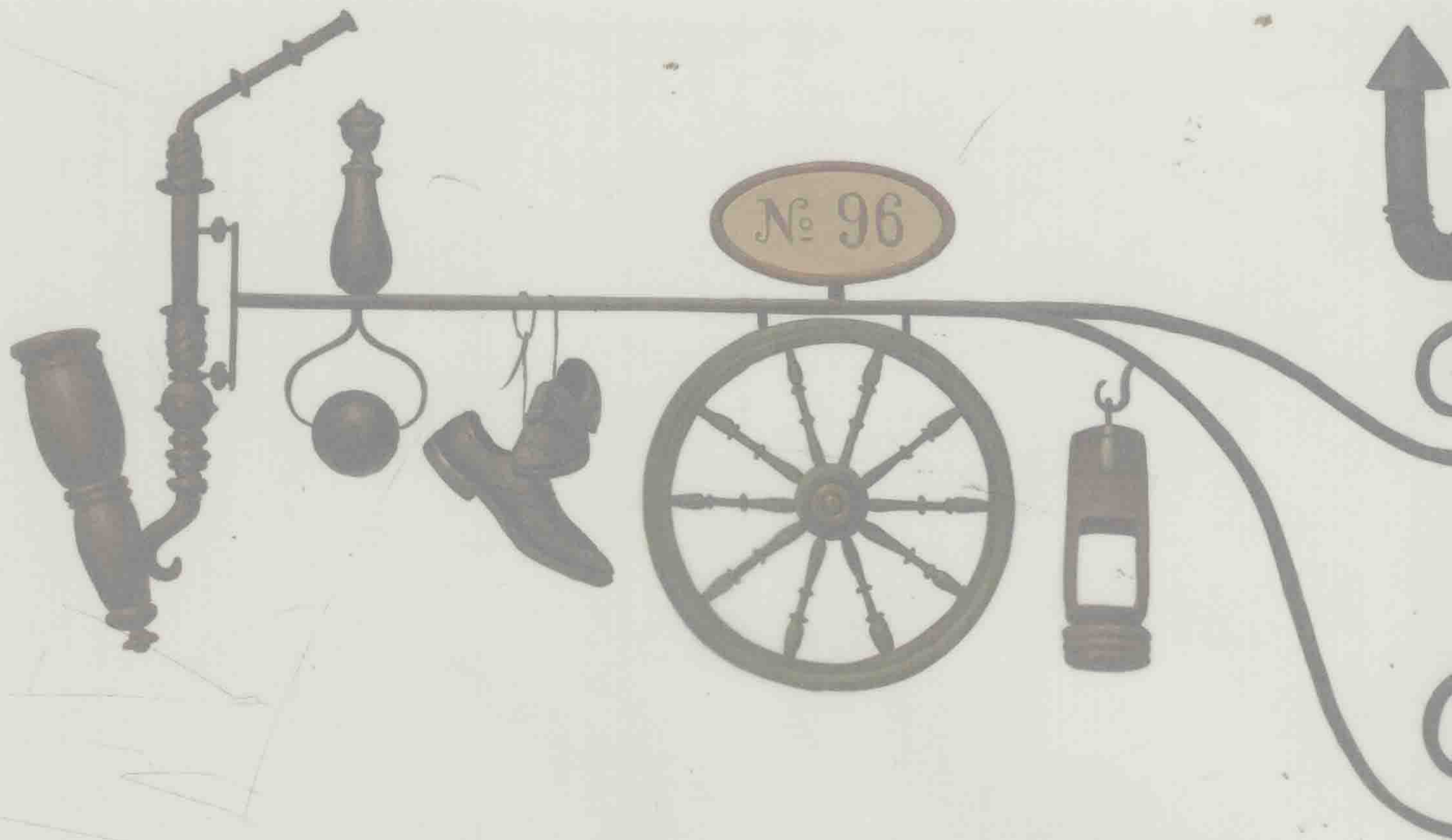
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With love for Marion



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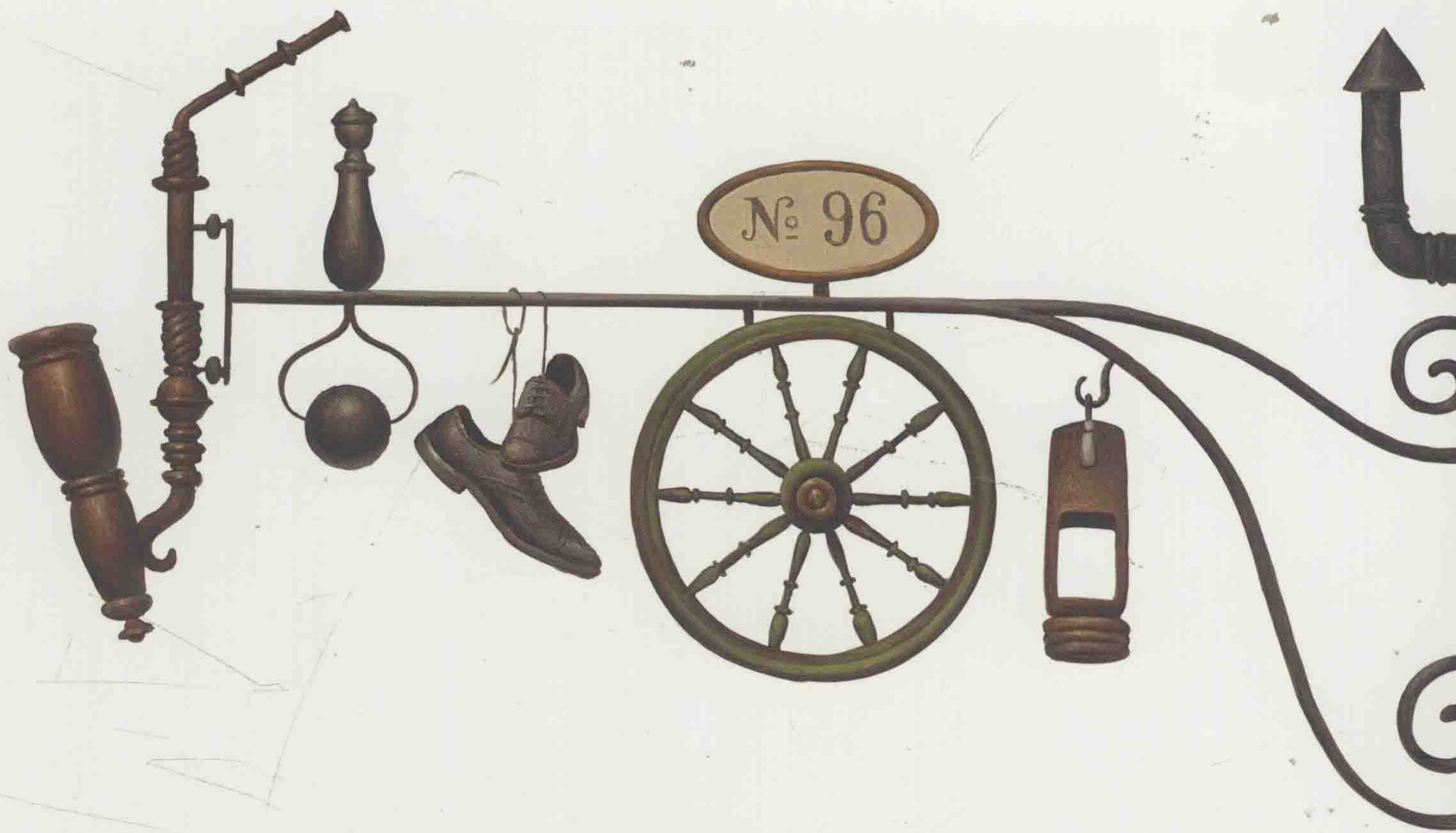
THE GAY 20.2

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WELCOME TO MARK RYDEN'S WORLD

Sometimes you can tell a book by its cover. The young creature who is stepping towards us on this one is barefoot, not looking at us, seemingly lost in reverie. Her platinum bangs are in what, back in the last century's approximation to the Gay '90s, the Swinging '60s, might have been called a Vidal Sassoon cut. She has huge blue eyes, porcelain skin, unpainted nails, pubescent breasts and, as with Ryden's other paintings of adorable cutie-pies, the viewer is clearly not intended to experience a surreptitious Balthusian frisson. "They are a kind of soul figure," Ryden told me. "My wife says they are self-portraits."

It will not have escaped the keen-eyed that the living doll is wearing a crinoline made of meat, namely legs of pork, haunches of mutton, sides of beef, strings of sausages, whatever. Most painters who depict meat—Soutine being perhaps the most in-your-face—have exploited the luscious versatility of pigment to capture meat's sheer *meatiness*. However, under Ryden's deft hand, meat transubstantiates, becomes unbloody, though delicately filmed with fat, and it is only the more disturbing for that.

Behind the young thing we see white stone steps, an urn with pink roses, a bower, a fountain. This scene recreates the eighteenth century, upon which the actual Gay '90s liked to dwell, the world of Fragonard and of Aubrey Beardsley's unfinished novella, *Under The Hill*. But this mishmash of references—those blonde bangs would look great on a 1960s Pan Am stew—do not collide. Rather, they cohere into a singular, calm, unnerving vision.

Welcome to Mark Ryden's world.

Ryden was born in Oregon, the Pacific Northwest, but he was raised in Southern California, where he found the art world to be an unbuzzing hive of

Conceptualism. "I didn't feel a connection to what was going on in the art world," he says. "It was a low-energy period. It wasn't something that inspired me. It was commercial art that inspired me."

"And there was a lot of energy bubbling underground. It was kind of an isolated world but it was very exciting."

So Ryden contentedly studied commercial art at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, graduated in 1988, and set out on a career during which he made album covers for Michael Jackson, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Aerosmith (Check out his work on Aerosmith's album *Love in an Elevator*), among others.

Meanwhile, the bubbling energies about which Ryden spoke were already spilling over into galleries, almost entirely on the West Coast, where they coalesced into a movement called Pop Surrealism or—more acutely—Lowbrow. This was an art that channeled comic books and rock posters, along with visuals wrenched from the hot rod, skateboard, heavy metal, fetish, and tattoo cultures. Pop and Neo-Pop artists had also, of course, tapped into just such roiling energies but even such hardcore practitioners as Paul McCarthy and the late Mike Kelley managed to transmute their raw materials into fine art. Lowbrow artists, though, love kitsch just the way it is, and far too passionately to wish to change it. They are not mounting an assault on the proprieties and protocols of the art world, as, say, Dada was. They simply ignore them.

This is the rambunctious menagerie into which Ryden was dunked by Robert Williams after he had been making commercial art for several years. Williams, who came to prominence with the Zap Comix Collective, along with S. Clay Wilson and R. Crumb, in 1994 put Ryden on the cover of the

second issue of his magazine, *Juxtapoz*, the house organ of that entire culture. Ryden's visual origins differ from most Lowbrow—he loves Hieronymous Bosch and Ingres as well as Margaret Keane, the Teletubbies, and Barbie Dolls—but his subversiveness made him instantly at home. He has made his living as a gallery artist ever since.

Where Ryden differs from Lowbrow and from other artists in general is not only due to his remarkable representational skills or that he uses them to make pictures that have not one particle of academic realism about them. The same might be said of a handful of other artists—John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and Mike Cockrill come to mind—but they are contemporary artists, painting remarkable pictures. And Mark Ryden? He is kind of a Pre-Modernist, a Henri Rousseau, allowing us into a world that may well be a phantasm but looks solid enough. There is a recurring cast—the dour Lincolns, the weakly holy Christs—and there are bizarreries, plus touches of near-cruelty—Lincoln at a meat grinder—and disturbances of scale that recall the pre-Surrealism of the children's book illustrators of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. But, for all that, Ryden's world is as convincing as something you might see through a window. "And I think that's what troubled the fine art world for a long time," Ryden says. "They found the realism somehow shocking."

These sequential shocks pulse through *The Gay 90's*. "I have a lot going on in these paintings that relates to the sentimental view of Old-Fashionedness," Ryden says. "[The Gay '90s] was a very strange old-timey thing that had become kind of sordid and strange by the time of the Lawrence Welk Show. Those things are baffling."

This is radical stuff. What we are talking about here is the primal power of kitsch; not kitsch-as-bad-art or kitsch-as-weak-art or even kitsch-as-purely-commercial-art but kitsch as a kind of an alternative, a power in its own scary right—a power that Ryden uses, without subverting its essential nature.

Mark Ryden is now a gallery artist, represented by Michael Kohn in Los Angeles and Paul Kasmin in New York. "So basically what's been happening," I proposed, "hasn't been that you were moving towards fine art but that the world of fine art has been moving towards you?"

"That's a good way to put it," he agreed.

ANTHONY HADEN GUEST



LA CONVERSATION DANS LE JARDIN

2010

Graphite on paper

12-1/2" x 9"



MARK RYDEN AND THE TRANSFIGURATION OF KITSCH

We humans are time travelers. While our bodies move forward in time at a constant rate, our minds are unfettered, and move back and forth through time at will. In our idle moments we cannot resist the bittersweet allure of nostalgia, and love to daydream over souvenirs of moments passed—cherished trinkets that allow us to reanimate a prior experience or recall an alternate version of reality. As Marcel Proust famously mused, “When nothing else subsists from the past, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered . . . the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls . . . bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory.” Through communion with those objects that resonate for each of us individually, we are able to conjure a delicious sense of longing for some wondrous time when there was still magic in the world, when nature abounded in mystery and was imbued with a kind of spiritual aura.

Doubtless, primitive men were in wonder of their sacred amulets and fetishes; pilgrims in the Middle Ages journeyed far to gaze on mysterious relics associated with a miracle or infused with the holy effluence of a saint. During the Renaissance, a multifarious display of eclectic objects and natural anomalies was *de rigueur* for many well-heeled aesthetes. Their “cabinets of curiosities,” or *wunderkammeren*, were the precursors of the natural history museums we visit today to gaze upon the wonders of Nature. As the rapid changes of the Industrial Revolution forever altered our connection to the preternatural world, an existential emptiness sprang up in the hearts of men. Having lost touch with nature’s mysteries and her predictable rhythms of tradition, humans sought to fill the vacuum with a utopian fantasy of the pastoral idylls of yore. With the simultaneous advent of mass reproduction, the glorification of memory was soon popularized, industrialized, and commodified, which lead to the frenzied production of nos-

talgie mementoes calculated to pluck at the heart-strings of every segment of society. As those objects traveled through time and their original purpose faded from memory, their essence evolved and symbolized something subtly different in each succeeding generation.

The arbiters of the formalist and conceptual art world disdain nostalgia and its physical manifestation, “kitsch,” as the pathetic refuge of the uncultured masses, and uphold appreciation of the abstract and conceptual as the distinction of the refined mind. Yet the universal archetypes that connect us all are not nourished within the haughty academies of artistic formalism. They grow within each of us, fed by the dark underground river of our thoughts, feelings and dreams. When we come across a stuffed bunny, a tin robot, or a storybook that sets off a haunting resonance within us, something deep in our psyche has recognized a conduit between the waking world and the fertile landscape of the unconscious.

Despite its tawdry reputation, kitsch is a perennial focus of contemporary art. Artists like John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, and Paul McCarthy approach their subject from the supercilious viewpoint of camp, laughing at their “bad taste” while simultaneously reveling in it. Jeff Koons maintains an ironic distance from kitsch, as he transforms a valueless object like a small, gaudy porcelain figure of Michael Jackson into something valuable—a work of art—by mocking and exaggerating its cultural vulgarity. Mark Ryden cherishes his ostensibly kitschy subjects, and elevates them to the status of sacred symbols through their transformation into masterful painting. Employing time-honored, artistic craftsmanship passed down from Neoclassic painters like Ingres, David, and Bouguereau, Mark Ryden bestows on his subject new layers of meaning and ambiguity, reawakening them as images that evolve and inspire.

For Ryden, nostalgia is more than a panacea, a gentle salve that soothes the raw edges of modern existence—it is the very lifeblood of art. When he sits down to paint he is surrounded by a jumble of wonderful old toys, books, and peculiar artifacts that whisper to him in their myriad voices, sparking distant memories and forging strange new connections. But even a lover of nostalgic artifacts has his limits. Recently, Ryden has been pushing himself to embrace an arena of kitsch so egregious that it makes him feel strangely uncomfortable. He has challenged his own aesthetic boundaries by embracing a particularly awkward era quaintly known as the “Gay ’90s.” He explained, “I would look at modernist attitudes that detest the taboo subject matter of nostalgia, imagination, and beauty, and think about how incredibly closed-minded this attitude is. But I came to realize I have my own thresholds. I gravitated towards the Gay ’90s because it is the extreme of ‘distasteful kitsch.’ I wanted to play with it. Why not try to pull the lowest of the low into the highest of the high? It is interesting how those exclusionary modernist attitudes are as ‘olde tyme’ now as the 1890s were when modernist thinking was born.”

Today, the 1890s have passed from living memory, and all that remains is a saccharine fantasy. Ironically, the era never actually existed as we now conceive it. “The Gay ’90s” is a frothy confection concocted in hindsight almost two decades later. Our collective imagination of that time is formed by the kitsch left behind by a thirty-year wave of nostalgia that arose in the early twentieth century. “Gay ’90s” mania came to a head with the rise of the new consumer culture of the “Roaring ’20s,” an era bracketed by two depressions and two world wars. Conservatives reacted to the turbulent times by pouring out waves of nostalgia about the golden age of their youth, prior to the United States’ involvement in World War I. For them, the 1890s were the equivalent of the 1950s for us today—a respite of idyllic small-town life, the last moments of a simpler time before the advent of automobiles and recorded music. Looking backward, they recalled the “good old days” of

straw hats and striped suits, marching bands and barbershop quartets, Gibson Girls, bicycles built for two and civility for all. Yet in the real 1890s, most Americans worked on farms or in urban factories, immigrants and minorities were highly segregated, and the small-town utopia existed only in the summer enclaves where the upper class vacationed to escape the soot and heat. This extraordinary nostalgia for the Gay ’90s was one of our longest episodes of cultural self-hypnosis, and lasted well into the 1940s.

By the 1960s, when Ryden was a child, the lingering artifacts generated by this wave of nostalgia had begun to seem trite and old-fashioned. Even as a boy, he loved to spend his days drawing or painting alone at his desk, dreaming of Egyptian mythology and metaphysical numbers. And while his creativity was being nourished by the countercultural album art, psychedelic posters, and underground comics his older siblings shared with him, he was also being exposed to sentimental pablum like *The Lawrence Welk Show* and schmaltzy trinkets that recalled “the good old days.” So a few years ago, Ryden started to examine his own ambivalence about that sort of “unacceptable” kitsch, and explore the conflicting waves of attraction and repulsion he felt when he encountered it. Such imagery, to Ryden, felt clichéd and sanitized, as if a living symbol has been bowdlerized to satisfy a corrupt cultural agenda.

In this series of paintings, Ryden returns, as he has done time and again, to his trusted cast of characters—his own pantheon of swap-meet spirit guides. The mythic figure of Abraham Lincoln is invested with an aura of divine power, despite donning clownish Gay ’90s apparel. Jesus Christ, the entertainer, is portrayed as a shrunken figure playing a toy piano, while elsewhere he bears his eternal burdens astride a bicycle built for two. Languid girls exuding a doll-like innocence and a knowing sensuality appear in nearly every painting, at times bearing fetuses tidily wrapped in their birth membranes, like hard candy in cellophane.