

FIRST LOOK



Helen Marten:
Dust and Piranhas,
2011, video, approx.
25½ minutes.
Courtesy Johann
König, Berlin.

Helen Marten

By Kayla Guthrie

THE 27-YEAR-OLD BRITISH ARTIST Helen Marten uses a wide range of materials, from digital graphics, tchotchkes and custom-fabricated neon lights to textiles, wood and powder-coated steel, creating style-obsessed installations, videos and sculptures.

Marten's 25-minute animated video *Dust and Piranhas* (2011) is a comic, moody drift through generic computer-rendered spaces, scored with rap interludes and atmospheric instrumental passages. The script features brooding monologues, largely in voiceover, but occasionally spoken by objects themselves—such as two Greek columns, an Ionic and a Doric. As we pan slowly over a display of Greek pottery, the Ionic's voice chirps about suburban development, modern appliances and other signs of middle-class comfort, as if to equate the priceless and museum-worthy with the merely banal.

Similar themes emerge in *Some Civic Shades (Highball Hi Rise)*, 2011. Like an enlarged still from one of Marten's videos, this installation takes the form of pale wallpaper

depicting a huge steam engine amid clip art and doodles allegorizing the processes that enable free trade, technology and speed. Lurking behind hands clinking cocktails in a jovial toast is a shadow of the steam engine, symbolizing the industry that underlies the drinkers' leisure. A baker, pulling his wooden tray from an oven that takes the form of a disembodied forearm chiseling a chunk of stone, illustrates income ("bread") being extracted from labor.

Marten, who earned a BFA from the Ruskin School of Fine Art at the University of Oxford, in 2008, lives in London and has shown in recent group exhibitions at galleries throughout Europe and the U.S. This year she has been the subject of three European institutional solo shows. Although she's not the first artist to mix throwaway esthetics and high culture, Marten doesn't just coast on aptly chosen references. Like Rachel Harrison or Paul Chan, she takes on the role of artist as editor and set director, arranging scenes and symbols to reveal the stories hidden in style. ○

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Evian Disease," at
the Palais de Tokyo,
Paris, through
Jan. 7, 2013;
"Helen Marten,"
Chisenhale Gallery,
London, through
Jan. 27, 2013.
Marten is included
in the group show
"New Pictures of
Common Objects,"
MoMA PS1, New
York, through Dec. 31.

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