

# Artweek



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NOVEMBER 1999  
VOLUME 30  
ISSUE 11

\$4.00



### Paul Paiement at Remba Gallery

**P**aul Paiement's exhibition *Hybrids* at Remba Gallery is a happy reminder that good things can come in small packages. At first glance the seventeen well-crafted paintings on display appear to be insect studies of the kind one expects to see in a museum of natural history rather than in an art gallery. Upon closer inspection, what looked to be scientific illustration becomes a wacky game of perceptual analogies—a kind of hide and seek of the natural and the inorganic.

Paiement's "hybrids" are really droid-insects, composite inventions made up either partly or wholly of inorganic objects. Objects from our modern mechanized world—things like trash cans, helicopters, Walkmans and electric shavers—are morphed into body parts of cicadas, moths, cockroaches and beetles. The game is to spot these odd things within their insect-matrices. The first surprise comes in recognizing the object, the second in realizing the absurdity of the analogies that have been proposed:

that a cleated athletic shoe could even momentarily be mistaken for the veined wing of an insect or that a pair of sunglasses overlaying a shaver could be likened to a moth. Such thoughts provoke laughter.

Most humor is generated out of breaking laws or taboos. Paiement's canny use of insects' "lawful" bi-symmetry sets up the viewer as a kind of visual "policeman." If the laws of symmetry were obeyed, as in most realistic insect illustrations, we would quickly lose interest. But here, the laws are broken: one side is not the mirror-image of the other, and that transgression leads us to discover that a *Stapanorrhina* (beetle) has a trash can for part of its underbelly or that a *Coccinella* (ladybug) contains within its outlines both a Walkman and a crown.

Morphological puzzles such

as these are not new. Indeed, one way or another, ambiguity is as old as art. Archimboldo's faces are soon understood to be composed of fruits and vegetables. Before the viewer's gaze, Salvador Dali's nuns ironically metamorphose themselves into the head of Voltaire. As Gombrich shows in his memorable study of the psychology of visual perception, *Art and Illusion*, it is the viewer that does the work in unraveling these ambiguous images or "rival schemata" as he calls them. Perception is choosing between competing solutions.

Were the solution to such visual puzzles final, as for example the solution to a crossword puzzle, our pleasure would soon be over. But visual enigmas have a persistence that outlives and defies rational explanation. Identifying the "subject" may not resolve the contradiction we experience. The eye continues to probe, unwilling to accept what the mind already knows.

—George Tapley

Paul Paiement—*Hybrids* closed October 21 at Remba Gallery, West Hollywood.

George Tapley is an artist and freelance writer based in Costa Mesa.

Paul Paiement, *Hybrids B—Coccinella Walkmanana*, 1999, egg tempera on panel, 18" x 18", at Remba Gallery, West Hollywood.

