

Art in America

MAY 1996

Mac James at Barbara Braathen

Mac James's show came as an autumn revelation. Seldom is work so distinctly postmodernist also classically modern and genuinely positive about contemporary possibilities for a meaningful "new" painting. Rather than disowning modern art or paying backhanded homage through self-conscious parody, the 39-year-old James brings it new life through his eclectic practice. This is postmodernism for people who hate postmodernism.

James has shaped a public spectacle out of a privately nurtured vision. Most often, he begins his medium-to-large canvases with an ambiguous ground, arrived at through laborious deployment of rubbed, poured and brushed pigment. The pictures are mostly browns or grays, the nocturnal shades of the American metropolis. Next comes the difficult task of crossing, say, Futurist or Surrealist dynamics with a complex Analytical Cubist structure. The results often resemble a mapping of all of Manhattan at once, or they may evoke an unexpectedly geometric de Kooning.

There's Max Ernstian dream-Surrealism in the repeated appearance of a favorite motif—the sharks of Florida, where James grew up. Sharks appear solo, hovering over Gotham, or in endless schools, dashing over background grids with all the zealous displacedness of any fish out of water. Some critics, indeed, seem to have felt that the sharks are the main attraction here, which is a little like taking floor tiles as Vermeer's sole concern.

James can be far more man-



Mac James: *Luna*, 1995, oil on canvas, 94 by 73 inches; at Barbara Braathen.

darin in his imagings and imaginings than we might expect: a highlight of the show was the 1995 *Masquerade*, in which heads that come straight from the artist's unconscious hover like apparitions on de Kooning-esque backgrounds. The one-color silhouetted heads include obviously archetypal sorts—a distinguished Apollo with gorgeous, rough-hewn hair, all in sienna, or a joker, or a (quite erotic) stag with pinebough antlers (more likely a representation of Pan, Dionysus or Bacchus than Satan). The heads are sexy, scary, yet hauntingly familiar. James has brought their esthetic and spiritual protection to bear upon the "magic kingdom" of modernism itself. —Gerrit Henry