

# BEN GRASSO

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# KINKEAD CONTEMPORARY

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**TOP**  
 "American Oblique," 2008  
 Oil on canvas  
 70" x 50"

**LEFT**  
 "House of Cards," 2008  
 Oil on canvas  
 100" x 70"

Kinkead Contemporary recently displayed a new series of paintings from New York-based artist Ben Grasso, entitled *Close to Home*. This latest body of work continues to loosely address Grasso's prior existing interest in depicting contemporary urban landscapes and aberrant domestic structures. He documents the world around him, imagined and factual, with a sort of magical realism, both in the initial sense of the word by German art critic Franz Roh and its later appropriation by Latin American writers. In the context of Roh's meaning, situated within the post-Expressionist dialogue, Grasso's works reveal both the magic and transitory nature of all objects—objects that have almost become invisible because of their very familiarity.

Grasso's works verge ever so slightly on the surreal; in fact, his strongest works are those that flirt with altered instances and prompt an emotional or psychological response. Standouts include his visions of mid-air kaleidoscopically fractured and exploding houses, lifting off as if to Oz in "House of Cards," or a bee's nest attacked by a swarm army of paper planes and porch swings in "Close to Home." Now the center of activity, the hive buzzes with monolithic import, and a grade school joke is at once playful and menacing. "Just Keep Looking Up" turns the mind's eye to a disorienting and vertiginous

structure perched or lodged in tree branches, while "November" seems to present some sort of cryptic marker—a white flag from a battle lost or a sunken ship, perhaps.

The paintings' true overarching strengths, however, are their formal qualities. The oil-on-canvas paintings are lush, beautifully painted visages. In a brash move, Grasso purposefully allows his paintings to bear evidence of workings and re-workings taking place directly on the surface of the canvas. Rather than meticulously laying out the final product, Grasso's multiple layered revisions evidence a spontaneous approach.

By portraying technically impossible realities, Grasso seems to dreamily desire to capture the essential nature of all things around him. In some ways, this attempt to create a world that is simultaneously fictive and hyper-real can be traced back to the romantic ideal that art should transcribe what lies beyond immediately perceivable surfaces. Though certainly not idealized, in many ways, Grasso's hand almost longs to be applied to classic Hudson River School epically heightened vistas. His sweeping hand almost feels out of place within a postmodern dialogue, instead best suited to sublime American pastorals, where man harmoniously co-existed with his surroundings and complications such as

industrial zones, demolition sites, and abandoned structures didn't interfere with the land.

Within Grasso's bizarre confections and intersections, however, he shows that today's postmodern landscape is worked and re-worked not by the slow and steady hand of nature, but by the impatient and fickle bulldozer and contracts of man, as it has now been for centuries.