

JARVIS ART

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Archie Rand: *Heads*

By Ekin Erkan



Installation view of *Archie Rand: Heads*, Jarvis Art, New York, 2026. Courtesy Jarvis Art.

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Archie Rand: *Heads* at Jarvis Art includes twelve figurative paintings executed between 2024 and 2025. Ranging in their thematic content, they countenance both the worldly and wondrous. At times, Rand dovetails these two poles, as in the fantastical *Duck* (2025), where a lavender- and claret-skinned sailor duo buoys aboard a tawny wooden sailboat across cresting cyan waves. The boyish skipper casts his right arm around the prow, from which a carved figurehead of a green mallard duck arcs upwards, its golden beak indicating an off-canvas subject toward whom the juvenile captain waves. The more quotidian *Piano* (2024) posits the eponymous instrument and its bench in a tangerine lambency. In the background, rolling honey-flaxen towers fulgurate across the plum skyline. With the exception of a lone clawed piano leg that rests on a small crystalline shard of reflective land, the instrument stands braced on an azure outdoor plain painted flat enough to prohibit any indication of grass blades.

While many of Rand's best-known past works have been anchored in liturgical, scriptural, or literary imagery, this most recent suite is, with the exception of *Goldilocks* (2025), more untethered. This is not to suggest that there is no throughline with his extant work—each figure is set aglow in blush and cerise skin, with verdant jade plains casting his character studies in rich, highly saturated gradients. Rand's acerbic greens, magenta, and violets are archetypal of his sustained chromatic tuning. In subject and color, his approach is keenly reminiscent of the fantasy comic imagery of Ralph Bakshi, Philippe Cazaumayou, Nicole Claveloux, Richard Corben, Philippe Druillet, and Jean Giraud (also known as Moebius). Rand, despite being flanked by Color Field painters and geometric abstractionists during his youth, was broadly sympathetic to this comic tradition.

Given his lurid colors and loose facture—for, though Rand outlines his characters, his fence-hopping boys and Phrygian-capped townsmen's skin are flurriedly figured in soft impressionistic strokes—one is tempted to compare him to modernist expressionists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Eduard Bäumer, or heirs of this tradition like Christian Ludwig Attersee. His antecedent work escaped such comparisons precisely because of its thematization of biblical stories. His newer images, however, are mostly depurated of identifiable allegorical context. Yet they are also imbued with a sense, though only a sense, of plausible referentiality—that is, they strike one as if they could have been lifted from illustrative accompaniments to medieval tales. Such connotative lures can hardly be escaped when standing before *Duel* (2025), where a cherry-caped, would-be duelist, caught in a quiescent moment, palms his chin. Behind him, a gilded green knight erectly stands atop a tessellated floor, his trailing sword indicating an impending battle.

In a review of Rand's 2025 exhibition, *Sons*, at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin, where the artist exhibited an earlier suite of works, Andrew Paul Woolbright espied the artist's appropriation of “commercials and advertisements, and the pulp pages of comic books,” likening his practice to “painting as retrieval from the ten cent pages.” It is not immediately clear that in this latest series, Rand seeks to present even tenuously identifiable referents. But one can certainly engage in genre-painting the likes of pulp noir or science-fiction fantasy without appropriating specific instances of that genus. Reflecting on his more textually anchored work in a February 2016 conversation with perhaps the most assiduous writer to contend with Rand's oeuvre, Barry Schwabsky, the artist remarked, “What I wanted to do was make the visual image so inherently iconographic that one would be

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attracted primarily to the visual, and then as an afterthought, sort of, pick up on what the text was.” In a way, Rand’s methodological interest in rending iconographic images from source material continues to undergird these later paintings. But (again, Goldilocks aside), this ambit is far more challenging if an artist eschews primary material to anthologize. This is also liberating, insofar as it allows Rand to engage in pure genre painting, producing science-fantasy and neon-bathed noir fragments.

Where Rand’s work most successfully traffics in a phenomenologically attuned sense of familiarity, it is by dint of alienating formalist devices. Incidentally, those scenes that are veiled with this latent sense of disconnect are not fantastical fairyland apologues peopled by wine-stained feudal fighters, but commonplace ones, where a slightly askew visual element galvanizes incongruity. In *Climb* (2024), for instance, a sumptuous, bisque-sunned flat plain flanks a pink-tinted wooden box. The titular climber— a boy whose visage is obfuscated by way of quickening mulberry strokes-attempts to scale the lone, flush-tinted structure. The dust-dusked, mauve-gray skyline ahead suggests nighttime, but a cast of sunrays perforates a semicircular ring beside the plain. The weak sun cannot be the source of the wooden façade’s alien fuchsia hue. Behind the boy and oversized structure, the desolate expanse stretches into a flat block. The aberrant element is slight, formal, and restricted to two elements: a shimmering glow and the level background’s spatial containment. But in its modesty, it is all the more effective.

Relatedly, in *Walk* (2024), an apricot-washed scene finds a woman wearing a conical ruby hat, tugging along a leashed pink pig. A single tufted cloud roils into a puffed, silver-fringed billow. Rand is no Surrealist, and hence his discordance does not belong to masked personae or disjunctive figures; the pig is thus no cause for anomaly. Rather, the askew element is the smoking cloud pocked by a souring swallow’s roseate silhouette. Producing pulp painting sans allegory, Rand’s most recent works are at their best when the artist imbues the image with uncanny formal shifts. These fitful images are more evocative than those populated by courtly genre archetypes, such as the satchel-snatching, scheming king depicted in the straightlaced *Door* (2025). It was this slight sense of oddity that informed Rand’s excellent “Letter Paintings” of the late 1960s and ’70s, which David Kaufmann, in his 2003 essay “Archie Rand’s ‘The Eighteen’ and Postmodern (Mis) Recognition,” lauded as “beautiful and witty hommages [sic] to Afro-American music” that not only “celebrate[d] the often forgotten achievements of the true heroes of American musical experience” but effectively poised themselves “on the edges between post-post-painterly abstraction (Rand was Larry Poons’s assistant), pop, and conceptualism, while critiquing all these movements.” Where clouds and backgrounds billow into alien formal elements, one can descry the attenuated remnants of this critical pluralist borrowing in Rand’s newer work, which now operates on the register of style rather than subject.