



LOOKING OUT, LOOKING IN

IN A CURSORY LOOK AT

the work of Robert Qualters, you will see a visual history of Pittsburgh sites: the bridges and neighborhoods, Kennywood and the Carnegie Museum of Art, the now demolished Jenkins Arcade and Forbes Field. Viewers love identifying these places and filling them with nostalgic memories, just as they are drawn to Pittsburgh scenes in the work of his predecessors: painters Aaron Gorson, Christian Walter, Samuel Rosenberg, and Henry Koerner and photographers from O. Romig and Luke Swank to W. Eugene Smith, Clyde Hare, and Mark Perrott, among many others.

But if they stop here, viewers are doing a disservice to Qualters. While the artist does frequently include his hometown, he mostly utilizes it as a stage for personal and communal memories, histories, and stories, both real and fictional. To really understand his paintings, one needs to read each and every detail in works that are almost

overflowing with anecdotes, images, brushstrokes, and color. Robert Qualters, in essence, is a visual raconteur, a modern-day flâneur who weaves fact and fiction into compelling stories that reveal human characteristics both universal and individual.

Kennywood, Pittsburgh's grand amusement park, began its life in the first decade of the twentieth century and remains a much loved destination, featuring the famous, highly rated Thunderbolt roller coaster. Despite the explosion of theme parks from Disneyland to Six Flags, Kennywood retains an old-fashioned flavor, and its opening signals the beginning of summer in Pittsburgh. Qualters painted it three times: *Kennywood Memories—Who* (1988), *Kennywood Memories—Kiddieland* (1988), and *Kennywood Memories—Turning* (1988). Each time he incorporates recognizable park features as locations for childhood memories.

Kennywood Memories—Turning presents the site of the park,

► *Kennywood Memories—Turning*, 1987
Mixed media on paper, 38 × 38 in.
Private collection



perched on a hillside with a view over the Mononaghela River to the fiery skies above the mills of Braddock. This perspective immediately signals that this work expresses a memory because by the time Qualters painted this scene the mills were fallow and the city skies, though gray a lot of the time, were clear again. Lighting up Braddock and the river, the colorful skies, done primarily in pinks and yellows, have the fluid look of watercolor, creating that temporary, ephemeral atmosphere so revered by Impressionist painters. But in fact, the skies have more in common with *Dulle Griet* (c. 1564), a work by Pieter Brueghel, one of Qualters's favorite artists. Brueghel's work presents the titular Dulle Griet, a woman from Flemish folklore more commonly known as Mad Meg, who pillages and plunders in front of the mouth of hell, which is represented by the fiery skies in the background, an apt parallel to the Pittsburgh skies when the city was called "hell with the lid off." In both works,

the sky adds a pyrotechnic effect and a chance for the artists to prove their reputations as colorists. A smaller version of this sky is found in the background of the other two Kennywood paintings.

This setting is one of the most memorable features of the park, but of course the rides are of paramount importance. The popular Thunderbolt dips and climbs its way through the middle ground of *Kennywood Memories—Who*, and the Ferris wheel, which offers a stunning view of the hills and rivers of Pittsburgh, revolves in *Kennywood Memories—Turning*. Both of these rides create structural anchors in their respective compositions, and each work features visitors enjoying these rides or strolling around the park, having a snack, or watching others on the rides. These figures are especially interesting in *Kennywood Memories—Who*, as they cast caricatured, cartoonish shadows of many colors. With these elements Qualters creates the atmosphere of the park, of that perfect vacation day that

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many of us can remember even if we've never been to Kennywood itself.

The major focus in each of these works is the kiddie rides that become the locus for memories and associations. Some recollections are purely personal, such as when the artist remembers the sense of vertigo caused by the rides that went round and round and round. In *Kennywood Memories—Who*, Bob reminisces about how he always tried terribly hard to be cool. Although he knew he was uncomfortable on those dizzying rides, he just had to prove himself. When it became obvious that he was going to be sick, his seatmate Ida kept yelling, “don’t throw up.” Despite her admonitions, he did throw up over the crowd, losing his cool quotient. He reinforces his discomfort with a handwritten text: “Who: Got lost? Found? Followed the big girls? Got sick on the airplane ride and threw up over the crowd below? Cried? Acted the fool? Was cool? Was it you?” Reinforcing the text is the

image of the boy to the right in the foreground, perhaps a surrogate for or a sarcastic reminder of the young Bob, who wears a T-shirt with “Cool Fool” on it. Many viewers can identify with this particular anecdote, which is such a typical childhood experience. Bob has a laugh at himself and his juvenile antics. While he looks back at his own life, he touches upon an experience common to male adolescents, making his work accessible to a wide audience.

The personal references continue in *Kennywood Memories—Kiddieland*, where he positions a figure, who again could be himself, in the friezelike arrangement of people in the foreground. The little kid holds a bright red balloon that looks an awful lot like a penis. Perhaps it is an earlier version of the big red one in *A Life*. The introduction of eros into the theme park is underscored by the cars coming out of a rocky structure, which is similar to boats exiting the tunnel of love in other parks.