

Inka Essenhigh  
and her Green Wave

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The *Green Wave*, 2002, by Inka Essenhigh, is an oil-on-panel painting that measures five by six feet. (Figure 1) It is from a series of *Waves*, and is part of the Virginia Museum of Fine Art collection. John Ravenal, the curator, chose *Green Wave* because Essenhigh is an artist who has “helped keep painting relevant in an age of excessive technology and media saturation.”(1) In this work, a virtual reality glove holds back a wave from crashing onto the creature trying to reach the shore. The wave eyes the creature in hopes of absorbing it before it is out of reach.

Inka Essenhigh was born in 1969 in Belfonte, Pennsylvania. Essenigh grew up in Ohio, where she received a “very traditional education in figure drawing and painted in a realist style” (2, p. 137) at Columbus College of Art and Design in 1991. Essenhigh moved to New York and earned a Masters of Fine Arts from the New York School of Visual Arts in 1993. After graduating, she worked as a fabric designer using simple, repetitive motifs for Sears boxer shorts. These cartoon elements “started to look more interesting than anything that was going on in the studio” (2, p. 138) and led to her first solo exhibition “Wallpaper Paintings” at the La Mama La Galleria in 1997.

During the late 1990’s, early in Essenhigh’s career, she received international recognition for her enamel abstractions described as “fantastic weirdness of imagery.” (2, p. 136) Essenhigh told Hilarie Sheets of Art News that her early interest in enamel was because she could “change it a million times.” (2, p. 136)

To establish motion for her object, she begins drawing a line representing a direction towards the future and might draw another to indicate the past. Essenhigh told David Hunt of Flash Art that these lines become “a suggested future stance, posture, or location rendered statically.” (3, p. 74)

Asked about the lack of facial features in her early work, Essenhigh stated that “the language of cartooning is so readable, it adds unnecessary baggage” (3, p. 77) and the faces tend to become “like a tattoo revealing all kinds of sociological information” (3, p. 77) result in judgements that she does not want the viewer to make. Instead, she says her faces are about energy allowing them to “float in and out of different things.” (2, p. 138)

This changed in early 2001. Essenhigh switched mediums from enamel to oil paint allowing her to create “more three-dimensional settings and characters with defined facial features” (2, p. 136) that better attract the viewers emotion. Her recent concentration on faces has focused on economical expressions like that of Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec. (2, p. 139) The new freedom of the oil medium has given way for a psychological dialogue that wasn’t there before. (2, p. 137) Bonnie Clearwater, director and curator for the Museum of Modern Art in Miami has followed Essenhigh’s transition because it “is risky for artists to change the overall appearance of their work, especially after achieving early success.” (4, p. 4)

Essenhigh told Adrian Dannatt of the Art Newspaper that her paintings are generalized themes and the narrative is a result of the formal decisions made during her application of paint to canvas. (5) The story told by her paintings “is the process of their own making.” (4, p. 4) Essenhigh explained to Flash Art that she starts a canvas with a color on it and mixes it with another that “might suggest other colors or a mood; sunlight or an ocean scene.” (3, p. 74) Eventually, she continues, the shapes and colors play an “almost equal and interchangeable role” that determines the mood or scene. (3, p. 74)

## Bibliography

1. *Virginia Museum of Fine Arts New Acquisitions* 2004 <[http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/accessions2003\\_march.html](http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/accessions2003_march.html)>.
2. Sheets, Hilarie M., "Swirls, Whirls, & Mermaid Girls." *ARTnews*. 103 (2004): 136-139.
3. Hunt, David. "A New Grammar of Motion." *Flash Art*. October (2000): 74-77.
4. Clearwater, Bonnie. *Inka Essenhigh*. Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, 2003.
5. Dannat, Adrian. "NY artist Q&A: Inka Essenhigh." *The Art Newspaper*.

## Appendix



photo: Katherine Wetzelschluess © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Figure 1