

Artist Paints Charming Portraits of 100 Goofy Clay Sculptures

Former abstract painter Peter Opheim explains why he turned to painting from clay models.

[Andrew Salomone](#)

Jul 23 2017, 7:30pm

Mashing clay into crude shapes is a common childhood activity, but a German-born painter has turned it into an endless source of content for an ongoing series of work. Using various types of clay to create his models, former abstract painter Peter Opheim adorns canvases with intuitively sculpted figures shaped by his own hands.

In *Miles and Miles*, one of the works in his current exhibition at Rood Gallery in New York, Opheim painted 100 of his whimsical figures, displaying each of the original clay creatures depicted in the painting alongside it in a large, wooden crate. "In the past year, I have created a group of paintings where the small sculpture that the painting is based on is kept and is considered part of the piece," Opheim tells *Creators*.





An installation shot of Miles and Miles

In addition to the unusually large number of figures featured in the painting, *Miles and Miles* is a departure from the type of clay Opheim often uses to make his figures. This shift in his process is also a conscious change in regards to the concept behind this ongoing series of work. "Usually, I use a type of artist's modeling clay that is oil based and doesn't harden, and after I use the sculpture for the painting, I don't keep it, but rather remake the clay into new figures. A metaphorical re-incarnation," says Opheim.



Hans, oil on canvas, 2017

While the figures Opheim sculpts are rough, his paintings feature carefully rendered forms with expressive brushstrokes. Opheim says that he began working from these models in an effort to address issues related to humanity. "I had been working non-objectively for many years, but I felt that contemporary abstract painting as a continued practice couldn't be made specific enough and that after a 100 years of so many other artists exploring this area, that it was time to move beyond this and to create work that was both more personal and imaginative in origin and which addressed those questions more directly of what it means to be human," he explains.

Although his paintings are no longer explicitly abstract, Opheim still sees a connection between working with abstraction and working from his handmade models. "One element that I like about non-objective painting is that it gives the maker an opportunity to create a complete and beautiful universe from their own mind. So, in the same way I continue to do that now by creating my own imagery," he says.



The Bird Flies, oil on canvas, 2017



This Year, oil on canvas, 2017