

LONDON

## Renee So

KATE MACGARRY

Until now, you may have given little thought to Assyrian beards. In fact, they are remarkable things, with tiers of spiral-like black curls perfectly aligned to produce an almost architectural construction with which to adorn the face of the Mesopotamian male. Renee So has evidently given considerable thought to the contours of Assyrian facial hair, along with other well-selected highlights in the history of human self-design: In the artist's tabletop-size ceramic sculptures, a variation on this beard is doubled and formed from a repeated pattern of semispheres glistening in delectable metallic glazes. In other sculptures and knitted panel pictures, So invents a uniquely stylized yet simple, almost cartoonlike bearded figure, repeated like a motif across every work. This character has strong, almond-shaped eyes, and on his head he wears a floppy sixteenth-century Dutch black hat (think Rembrandt). His curious balloon trousers are inspired by an image on a Japanese screen from circa 1600.

The artist is evidently fascinated by masculine accoutrements of all sorts: trousers, hats, pipes, walking sticks. Her nameless man is a composite of innumerable males spanning a wide assortment of sources, from the anthropomorphic bellarmine of sixteenth-century Germany to the double-sided king in your deck of cards. The beard on *Captain*, 2010, recalling those worn by the hallucinatory gentlemen who dance through the Beatles' 1968 film, *Yellow Submarine*, expands like a bubbling green potion.

So executes her two-dimensional works using a knitting machine, which precisely translates the artist's simple line drawings into large, carefully worked panels. Drawing and knitting are diametrically different operations; to make a thin line around a shape with the machine requires tremendous effort, interrupting what should be an easy mechanical process with a whole change of yarn color just for a single stitch, row after row. Yet each figure is painstakingly outlined this way. Machine-knitting necessarily builds the image (or the sweater, as the case may be) starting from the bottom, knitting line by line up to the top. Similarly, the sculptural works are built from the bottom up, through the accumulation of many small curved surfaces and flat slabs of clay, eventually rising to form sizable three-

dimensional wholes. Perhaps for this reason So's knitted men, absurdly "drawn" or "painted" in wool or acrylic, seem somehow solid and sculptural, akin to their ceramic counterparts. With her flawless distribution of shade and tone, So is an excellent colorist, and it would be easy to imagine her filling in large, flat areas with a wide brush—rather than occupied in the real work involved, sorting out spools of yarn. Yet she repeatedly returns us to the picture's true nature as knitwear—for instance, the orangey mélange background of *Drunken Bellarmine*, 2012, or the sporty gray and lime-green racing-stripe pattern of the box the figure is shown draped over. So's humanoids drift in some gravity-free place above conflicting disciplines and media—art, fashion, illustration, card games, cartoons, knitting, drawing, painting, ceramics, metalwork—leaping through time, history, and space with such ease, we are surprised that the final figure is so well-defined, so resolved in its repeated, unnerving appearances.

—Gilda Williams

Renee So, *Drunken Bellarmine*, 2012, wool, acrylic, oak-tray frame, 68½ x 48¾ x 2¾".

