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REVIEWS JAN. 15, 2010



## Mustafa Maluka

NEW YORK CITY,  
at Tilton

by Sarah Valdez

Born (in 1976) and raised in Cape Town, Mustafa Maluka has also lived in Amsterdam and Berlin, and currently divides his time between Helsinki and New York. His geographically and culturally multifarious background informs both the title—"A Place So Foreign"—of his recent spare, visually alluring exhibition of six large-scale oil and acrylic on canvas portraits, and his method of working: he combines elements from disparate images of various pop-culture figures and embellishes them to create imaginary young individuals. Pink hair, blue or green lips and skin speckled with decidedly not-flesh-toned colors are among the unnatural attributes of these nevertheless attractive subjects of indeterminate race. Backgrounds of multicolored stripes, polka dots and other patterns resemble lurid wallpapers. Additionally, Maluka decks out his subjects in similarly busy clothing, featuring more stripes, plaids, floral patterns and animal prints, all skillfully juxtaposed in jarring but appealing combinations.



The heavily worked, funky canvases, assertive at over 6 feet high and 4 feet wide, have titles that suggest the invented subjects' "thoughts" and reveal an internal dissonance. Passive visages are paired with troubled sentiments: *I Won't Let You Use Me Up*; *Their questions don't get easier*; *There's got to be an end to this beginning*; *I forgot where it all began*; *Always in the process of becoming*. Any of these monikers could pertain to any of the artworks since they bear no apparent relationship to what the paintings represent. They also provide a welcome complexity. That Maluka's style-conscious subjects might be ruminating on something other than their social image adds a slight layer of intrigue: appearance doesn't tell all.

That said, Maluka's subjects appear so sartorially put together that their existential angst isn't entirely easy to buy. Perhaps more

revealing is that, when his work was included in the Studio Museum's 2008 "Flow" exhibition, Maluka described his good-looking but disturbed characters as "migrants." While the friction between Maluka's lush canvases and his distraught titles provides interest beyond the obvious appeal of attractive, well-dressed youth, the paintings' formulaic compositions and repetitive subject matter succeed decoratively more than conceptually or emotionally.

*Photo: Mustafa Maluka: Home Again, Home. Again., 2009, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 by 52 1/4 inches; at Tilton.*

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