

In This Surreal SoHo Showcase, Even the Bathrooms Are Works of Art

BY MELISSA HERNANDEZ
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Talent and celebrity. Sometimes they co-exist, but in the contemporary art world it can be difficult to determine whether it is actually the art that determines an artist's success or the allure and aura built around the artist. Bad art can thrive under a good name, while great works by "no-namers" are dismissed, if they're ever even seen. It seems as though an artist has to be famous for being famous before he can be famous for his art.

Artists Ron Beach Jr. and Adam Krueger have found a loop-hole in this who's-who catch-22. In *Better Version of Me*, their joint show recently on display at SoHo's The Canal Chapter gallery, Beach and Krueger subvert the norm of art exhibitions by literally and figuratively doing away with borders, frames, and any such restrictions on the works they create. Their paintings become installations, sculptures, and a new way of experiencing art altogether.

Partnering with East Pleasant Pictures, Beach and Krueger created a festival-worthy film, available online at www.adamandron.com, that chronicled the show. The film fluctuates between documentary and mockumentary, appealing to fans of reality TV and *The Office* alike. In its wacky cynicism, the film blurs the line between what is real and what is not, questioning the importance of the art versus the "art star" and where our priorities lie within the deluge of pop culture that has invaded the art world.

Aside from this social commentary, the film serves an altogether stronger purpose: getting their artwork seen. In fact, the art is perhaps the only thing one should take seriously in this film. At one point, Beach steals Krueger's credit card and goes to Art Basel, the world's largest art fair, held annually in Miami. In a burst of brilliant melodrama, Krueger quits the show, Beach then takes out an ad in *The Village Voice* that states, "No Rules Ronnie. Call Anytime," to pay Krueger back the \$5,000-plus bill he incurred while in Miami. As wild as the plot twists become, it

is incredibly difficult to extract the truth from the fiction.

The artworks themselves exude a sexuality that is at once aggressive, self-aware, and uncompromising. Thematically, Beach and Krueger's works are very similar. Aesthetically, they exist on opposite poles.

Bold colors erupt from the brash and chaotic scenes of sex, violence, and oddities that comprise the work of Ron Beach. "People look at my work and it's extremely overwhelming and extremely violent and sexual, but I do it in such a childlike way that it almost becomes more acceptable," says Beach. "Cun-Nun-

Drum," an oil and mixed media painting on wood panel, features a cluster of brightly-colored emaciated human figures. The composition and color are so engaging that many people overlook the fact that this scene is about masturbation.

If the overt sexuality and violent—albeit playful—style is not enough to wow you, the sheer magnitude of Beach's work just might. In the piece "Tower of Power" Beach essentially barricades the gallery's 13-foot window with his paintings, most of which are painted on found objects such as doors, tables, glass panels and scraps of wood. It is as though Beach attacks the canvas, floor, wall, or whatever is in front of him with some blind surge of inspiration, transforming it into a primordial environment both strange and familiar.

If Beach's work is a shrill scream, Krueger's is a haunting whisper. It takes a moment to move past the ethereal beauty of Krueger's paintings to see the dismal, if not ominous, tone his images elicit. His paintings meld to the wall, absorbing the surface of the space into an organic element of the work itself. "Puncture" consists of an oil painting on canvas of a balloon punctured by a pin but not yet popped. The painting is eerily realistic, but more offsetting is the mass of human body hair that surrounds it, creating the illusion of a cast shadow.

"My Mattress" shows a pair of legs awkwardly poised on the edge of a mattress. The image is ghostlike. The mattress is only a few shades darker than the white of the wall, and the legs of the figure are merely suggested by the striped socks painted on canvas, cut out, and reassembled on the wall. By playing with negative space and subtractive compositions—in effect by denying the viewer of his scene's entirety—Krueger creates a world both autonomous and boundless.

The opposing styles of the artists battle each other in the many collaboration pieces created specifically for this exhibition. The juxtaposition, or rather the overlay, of the one artists' work on the other, creates an uneasy dialogue. "Golden Boy," which incorporates oil on canvas, oil on plastic, spray paint, toilet paper, and human hair, is half-Krueger, half-Beach. The figure, split in two, is a naked cartoon-ish man running with a roll of

golden toilet paper. Appropriately, this piece is on display in the gallery's bathroom.

As artists, Beach and Krueger create their own rules. Though painting, installation, sculpture, film, and performance are all used in this multimedia exhibition, Krueger and Beach show that ego is to art what truth is to satire. Passionate and unapologetic, they embrace the New York art scene only to turn it on its head.

★ WHERE IT'S AT *Better Version of Me*

The Canal Chapter



343 Canal St.
Between Greene and Wooster streets
4th Floor



Courtesy of The Canal Chapter

PLEASE DON'T LICK THE ARTWORK ■ Ron Beach Jr. and Adam Krueger's rule-defying *Better Version of Me* features bold multimedia pieces, subtle explorations of the limits of art, and even a wry parody of egotistical artists caught on film. For more intriguing imagery, check out the slideshow at www.columbiaspectator.com.