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New York Scene: Two dudes talking about art

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New York Scene : Two dudes talking about art

“**T**wo dudes meet on a sunny high street in SoHo, amid the bustling commerce of a Saturday afternoon — designer clothing, designer haircuts, designer coffee, street vendors with five English phrases to their credit, three-card monte dealers, ex-girlfriends selling hats. In other words, the expected late capitalist commodity glut of New York’s downtown art playground.”

- Dude.
- Yo dude.
- Long time no see.
- Right dude. I was gone for the summer.
- Lucky you. This neighborhood is starting to get on my case.
- (looking around) I know exactly what you mean.
- So, been by the galleries yet?
- No dude, not my scene.
- Too much attitude.
- You said it. I’d rather hang out on the street, or watch MTV. At least they’re up front about what they’re selling
- Totally. But dude, I’ve seen a couple of shows lately that you might want to check out. That bring the outside inside. That feel like sex, drugs and rock’n’roll.
- OK dude. I haven’t been infotained yet today. Let’s do it.
- (Two dudes enter the 303 Gallery, site of the Pruitt-Early exhibition entitled “Art for Teenage Boys”.)
- Hey, I feel right at home already.
- What’d I tell you, dude?
- Way to go. Cars, bikes, babes and beer. Heavy metal.
- A whole wall of music videos.
- Everything essential for life on the planet.
- Sex, rock’n’roll. What about drugs? The bongos, the crack vials, the hash pipes?
- Just say no, dude. It’s the nineties: it’s brewskis or nothing these days.
- Well, drugs are implicit, even without the paraphernalia. Like, check the speedy silver wallpaper. Shades of sixties’ methamphetamine madness.
- With a row of flame decals lovingly applied along the bottom. *Quel pit stop, n’est-ce pas?*
- Total garage trip. Reminds me of big brother’s psychedelic shack. Makes me want to flip on “Sly and the Family Stone”.
- Of course, you can’t do silver walls in this dude’s art world without invoking Warhol’s Factory, that first flowering of pure Pop for now people.



- Then those stacks of altered beer cans must be Pop-tops. And the t-shirt transfers mounted on panels of commercially printed fabric are some sort of third generation homage to the Campbell’s soup cans and Brillo boxes of the great Andy.
- Sure dude. Pruitt-Early are no fools, even when their art looks foolish. They have their references down. For example, where have you seen camouflage patterns recently?
- That’s right. At Andy’s army navy.
- Or Andy by way of Stephen Sprouse.
- So Pruitt-Early are striving for Factory Jr.
- Complete with Billy Name crooning “Your Cheatin’ Heart” on the video monitor.
- And those American flags on Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer logos. Jasper Johns or the Indy 500?
- A little bit of both, dude. It’s the typical postmodern art dandy approach, uniting high and low to attack the complacency and “good taste” of the middle.
- Like Kirk Varnedoe at MoMA.
- Not exactly, Varnedoe is presenting a “well considered” thesis, showing how vulgarized popular forms are elevated to the pantheon of high art, using a cushy venue and blue chip examples such as Picasso and Lichtenstein to validate his thesis. On the other hand, Pruitt-Early want to be aesthetic bad boys.
- Like the leaders of the pack: Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Meyer Vaisman, Ashlei Bickerton.
- Of course, these bad boys have been well paid for their indiscretions of late, and everybody knows it. So in choosing to be bad, Pruitt-Early are not exactly treading dangerously on uncharted territory. In fact, their “rebellion” is almost to be expected. They aim directly for the motherlode of contemporary art brat praxis.

— But they do milk their chosen vernacular, the merchandise of the suburban shopping center, with a shameless and gleeful abandon.

— They have definitely logged major time at the mall.

— Not to mention K-Mart and the 7-Eleven.

— And now they want to bite the hand that feeds them.

— Some serious commodity action going down. Are we talking Haim Steinbach?

— Dunno dude. Steinbach seems more rigorous in his choice and placement of commodities: those elegant, pristine platforms. He tries to establish a metaphoric resonance or narrative tension in his juxtapositions of consumer goods. An arena that Pruitt-Early don't enter. Conceptually, these dudes are scattershot, and not just a little bit sloppy. Their strategy is campy and accumulative, addicted to (over) saturation. More is more...

— Is more. And they certainly have the product to prove it. An entire wall of Harley Davidson biker patches on black panels. Muscle car logos (Camaro, Corvette) on camouflage cloth. Heavy metal biker deathheads ("Born to Raise Hell" and "Bad to the Bone") on tie dyed fabric.

— A den of debased signifiers. Available in S,M,L.

— And all prepackaged in plastic shrinkwrap.

— Real friendly art. Ready to jump off the wall and be loaded into the back of a station wagon.

— Together with a couple of cases of Pruitt-Early customized soft drinks. Cans with labels that read: "7-OP, Dr. Pecker, Diet Pipsi, Peppi Calo, Mountain Dow, Orange Crash and Caco Calo Gassic."

— Doo doo and ca ca. Very charming. Sophomoric bowel humor.

— Admittedly the wordplay is not exactly Joycean. But maybe that's the point. In the land of logo, where Pruitt-Early seem to live, brand names and disposable retail signs are the new poetry. And can be regurgitated as such.

— A *poesie concrete* of post industrial mercantilism.

— Or another example of the hyperreal. After all, logo does not deliver the actual commodity. Rather, it is a representation, a media projection of commodity that has acquired a greater reality and cultural resonance than the commodity itself.

— So what's in a label?

— In this show, everything. As long as you're happy to hover about one millimeter above the surface of things.

— Do Pruitt-Early wholeheartedly embrace this

superficiality? Or is there a critique buried somewhere in their work?

— Couldn't say, dude. And I imagine Pruitt-Early couldn't say either. They seem quite happy in their ambivalence.

— It's love/hate all the way when it comes to merchandise as art, and art as merchandise.

— At least for as long as the marketplace will bear it.

— Talking about marketplace, what about the music videos, which form a centerpiece of the show?

Are they art, merchandise, cult of personality, an extended art world in-joke? Or some ghastly hybrid slouching towards Bethlehem to be born?

— First and foremost, the videos are a great marketing ploy, with an instant audience. The artists, critics, dealers, curators, consultants and collectors who lip synch their way through Madonna, Prince et al. will have to come and see the show. Plus all their friends and enemies.

— By letting the art world in through the back door as collaborators, Pruitt-Early insure their attendance through the front door as spectators, perhaps, dare we say, patrons.

— Pretty slick salesmanship, dude, and couched as a low budget parody of MTV.

— Good clean fun for the young and the hip. Are we witness to nascent video stars within the New York art establishment?

— Well, no one should give up their day jobs just yet. But there are a couple of memorable cameos.

— Do tell, dude.

— Watch 303 Gallery proprietor Lisa Spellman as she smolders at the camera covering 2 Live Crew's "Me So Horny." Stone fox.

— Totally babe. And a blow for free speech.

— What about ur-collector and art consultant Estelle Schwartz's cover of "Crazy" by Patsy Cline?

— A tasteful, sincere, demure interpretation. I'm sure Estelle will have to return to see it any number of times. And bring her clients into the gallery, where they will have the chance to purchase other Pruitt-Early products.

— Kowabunga dude. Wheels within wheels. What about the Sally Stewart-Richard Prince cover of Madonna's "Vogue"?

— A nice historical edge here. In a direct appropriation from Bob Dylan's treatment of "Subterranean Homesick Blues" in the documentary film "Don't Look Back", Prince deadpans and flashes through a series of idiot cards that relate his personal pantheon of

hip Americana : "Steve McQueen, 1973 Dodge Challenger, the Flame Steak Restaurant".

— Did anybody actually cover Dylan?

— Not to my recollection dude. Maybe Pruitt-Early can get Julian Schnabel to do "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright".

— Or Roberta Smith on "The Times They Are A Changin".

— A Larry Gagosian/Mary Boone duet on Wham's "Wake Me Up Before You GoGo".

— The possibilities seem endless. A new industry in the making.

— Hear that, Pruitt-Early dudes?

(Two dudes split down the street and walk into the Larry Clark exhibit at Luhring Augustine Gallery.)

— Whoa dude. Teenage wasteland again.

— I figured we'd extend the theme from the last show.

— But this time it's snapshots.

— Snapshots is a good word dude, rather than photographs. These shots are too casually brutal, too candid and crude to get caught up in the usual handle of Art photography with a capital A. They're more like photojournalism, scarred images from the battlefield.

— Kind of a family album of wasted youth. The young, the restless and the damned.

— And enough nudity, especially male frontal, to sink a battleship full of Jesse Helms. Bad boys with big dicks, big drug habits, big hustles, big pistols. Life on the mean streets. Clark has an affinity for that scene.

— An affinity? He certainly has one for teenage boys. Where is this dude coming from exactly?

— From Tulsa, Oklahoma to be precise. But I'm not sure if that answers your question.

— Yo dude, you know what I mean. Is he a chicken fancier? Does he like to swing with the young cats?

— Well certainly in the spiritual or iconic sense, if in no other. Clark is fixated on adolescence as some formative, violent and sexually cataclysmic moment. It probably has something to do with his background.

— Do tell, dude.

— When Clark was a teenager himself, in the fifties, he was drafted into the family business, a door-to-door baby pictures scam that took him and his mother through scores of two-bit Oklahoma dustbowl towns.

— Baby pics, dude?

— "Kidnapping", as it was known in the trade. They'd show up at a house during the day, while daddy was working at the factory or oil refinery, and hit mom up for a couple of hard-earned family bucks in exchange for posed shots of her darling infant. This was Clark's



Pruitt-Early, *Painting for Teenage Boys, Dirt camouflage, Old Chevys Never Die*, early 90's. Heat transfers on fabric with plastic shrinkwrap, 6 panels; 58,4 x 58,4 cm each.

introduction to photography. His family later sent him to art school to hone his skills.

Clark, meanwhile, was hanging with a heavy crowd, a wrong side of the tracks assortment of hoodlums and junkies. It was the dawning of the drug culture. They would crack open an inexpensive, over-the-counter nasal inhaler called Valo and extract 150 mg, of pure amphetamine from the cotton wick.

— Uh dude. Valo. How do you spell that?

— Don't bother looking, man. It was taken off the shelves years ago. So here's Clark, back from art school, high as a kite, hanging with his buddies, shooting speed, digging the scene and taking photos of it all.

— Sort of a participant/observer, right?

— Yup. Clark was documenting the seedy underbelly of youth culture in his hometown, even as he was jumping in with both feet. Fixing shots, playing with needles and with guns, getting into burglary and armed robbery, having casual sex and group sex, scratching for a vein, getting wired, nodding out, dodging the cops.

— A real counterculture trip.

— Over a period of nine years, from 1963 to 1971, Clark returned to Tulsa several times to party with his speed freak friends and chronicle their scene, leaving behind a harrowing record of the self destructive trip: the druggy vacancy, barely submerged violence, petty criminality, the day to day detritus of skinny, tattooed arms being spiked with a needle for that roller coaster rush and the inevitable hollow bumner bringdown that followed. And, of course, Mr. D. Death. By the time the photos were published, most of the protagonists had already died from drug O.D.U.

— All this is rendered in a very deadpan, matter of fact style. There's no sensationalism here, although

you could imagine a B-film, *série noir* treatment of tragic, violent lives from the lower depths. You know, with a high key light and long shadows thrown down a gaping alleyway.

— Yo dude. Tankfully Clark as the integrity not to dramatize his shots with cheap, clichéd effects that would scream lurid all over the front pages. These were his friends, remember, and he presents them in a way that you imagine they would have preferred: candid, unadorned, no bullshit.

— It's the simple, artless nature of these photographs that makes them so real, so powerful. Tricky lighting, angles and compositions would provide irony, would establish an intrusive distance between photographer and subject. A distance that was, in fact, absent when Clark took the shots. He was part of the crowd then. Now he's the survivor who brings us these notes from underground.

— When *Tulsa*, a book of 50 black and white photographs, was published as a limited edition paperback in 1971 (legal complications prevent a second edition), most of the people depicted were dead or in jail. Clark started to follow the younger brothers and nephews of the *Tulsa* group, photographing the sex and drug exploits of a second generation. These photos, as well as later work from New York centering on the teenage hustlers on the Deuce (42nd Street), were collected in a second volume, *Teenage Lust: An Autobiography*, published in 1983. Selections from both books are hanging in the gallery.

— In that case, most of this show is a retrospective of Clark's art since the sixties. What about the new work?

— Not surprising, it remains fixated on adolescence, but Clark's focus has shifted to a media referential edge that is both more intellectually engaging and somehow more dispassionate and disinterested than his original work. Rather than concentrating on subjects that he knows intimately and personally, Clark has widened his perspective to include publicity shots or teen fan magazine tearsheets of pinup idols such as Corey Haim, River Phoenix and Kevin Dillon, and polaroids of Matt Dillon shot off the video screen. When he collages this material with his own black and white photos of, for example, a bulging, spreadeagled teenage crotch swaddled in skintight cutoff jeans, I don't get the point. A union of high and low, the famous and the unknown? An expose of teen sexuality that bridges the pretty boy appeal of actors with the nuts and bolts of teen hustlers? A reminder that sex is always what sells, that any girl (or boy) looking at Leif Garrett's face in *Tiger Beat* is ultimately thinking of his equipment?

— Dude, I agree. These composite or multipanel constructions often lack the rawness, immediacy and subversive beauty of *Tulsa* or *Teenage Lust*. They don't get under the skin of the subject, and they don't tell us anything about the media that we don't already know. But a lot of Clark's recent work does hit target. Like "Children of Alcoholics" (1988). Or the triptych of the kid with the Iron Maiden poster and cut off denim jacket holding a gun in his mouth.

— That last one is about as new as yesterday's headlines of the two boys who shot themselves because of a Judas Priest album. The PMRC would be proud: "Satanist rock causes teen suicide."

— Clark is stretching to make points in his new work, to teach an object lesson about the dysfunctions of American life. Like the collage with a pamphlet from Covenant House on "How To Talk To Your Teen". The current events chuckle about Father Bruce Ritter and the sexual abuse in teen shelters is clever, superficial. And that's where it remains: right on the surface. There's no resonance, no pain, and nothing is revealed.

— Of the recent work, my favorite is one of the large, untitled, bulletin board-like pieces that combine magazine and newspaper cutouts, other memorabilia and Clark's own b/w photos. It's personal and frankly fetishistic, a display of "live fast, die young, leave a good looking corpse" icons that feels like a work-in-progress.

— The visual references in that piece are wonderful: Lenny Bruce, Billie Holliday, Bruce Lee, the 1965 Rolling Stones, Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver*, Roberto Duran, Johnny Thunders, a Jesus postcard, a "Fuck Off and Die" button, and an envelope addressed to "Sean Penn, LA County Jail" that was sent back, marked "Contents Unacceptable: No Nude Pictures." Plus some of Clark's own b/w's of a teen hustler and a couple fucking.

— It's as if Clark is replicating, through the prism of his own subversive slant, the pinups and souvenirs on the bedroom wall of a particularly hip and particularly maladjusted teen.

— And who is this mystery teenager?

— Could be some dude Clark knows. A composite dude made up of hundreds of impressions and experiences. Maybe the teenage dude Clark once was and still harbors obsessively in his soul.

— Or the dude yet to come. It could be that dude, dude.

Steven Kaplan