

## REVIEWS

DEVIN TROY STROTHER at Richard Heller Gallery



DEVIN TROY STROTHER, DRUNK BITCHES FIGHTING IN THE BATHROOM, 2009. COURTESY RICHARD HELLER GALLERY, SANTA MONICA.

DEVIN TROY STROTHER IS A YOUNG ARTIST with a lot of talent, a lot of gumption and a lot of attitude. His work explores race in contemporary society with humor and criticality. Exquisitely crafted collages play with foreground and background relationships with narratives that layer sequences in time. The before, during and after of an event is often presented simultaneously in bursts of vibrant color and flying paper shards. These works are executed in a folk art naive manner with purpose in their exploration of African American culture and stereotypes.

In his ambitious solo debut at Richard Heller Gallery, Strother presents more than 25 works on paper whose figures expand beyond the confines of the rectangle. Figures with no dimensionality and few details, except for clothes, hair and facial expressions. Clothed or nude, isolated or grouped together, none of the figures stand alone, but is rather a character in a narrative. In pieces about dance, dresses are made from glitter; in works about violence they are covered in red blood pigment. They are crude shapes (they often have arms but no hands) and function like props taking part in a tableaux.

Many of the pieces express the grit of urban life. For example, *It's Us Versus Them* (2010) depicts a street scene where a crowd of brightly clad people watch from the sidewalk where there is clearly a battle between two gangs; half are dressed in black (with tall pointy hair) and gold chains, and the other half in white (with big round Afros). Both sides point their fingers out like children pretending to have guns, yet these pretend guns shoot real bullets as blood (red paint) splatters everywhere and the figures are trampled. Strother includes cliché ghetto signage - a video store, a barber shop, a swap meet and a liquor store to set the stage for the action. The work plays on stereotype and urban conflict. Tongue and cheek violence is prevalent throughout the body of work. *Drunk Bitches Fighting in the Bathroom* (2009) features a multiracial crowd of women engaged in a brawl in front of bathroom stalls. The high-heeled figures lurch at each other and fly through the air. The cause of their conflict is unknown but their hair, pointy breasts and a tampon machine distinguish them from his other characters.

The cartoon-like violence in some images is offset by dancing in others. Strother has remarked that his main source of inspiration comes from MTV and Nickelodeon. Hip Hop and Rap showed him "what it meant to be black," and cartoons everything else. Numerous works depict dancing and DJs. In *Please Mr. DJ*, and *Please Don't Stop That Electric Boogaloo*, (both 2010), it is evident that the mass of overlapping dancers are enjoying themselves, oblivious to their surroundings.

The environments Strother creates are made from layers of silkscreen flats and colored paper and share a kinship with the flat style of the cartoon *Southpark*. His exaggerated surfaces are often built from many strips of paper creating a confetti-like texture. Simultaneity - good vs. evil, black vs. white, pain vs. pleasure - is the crux of Strother's endeavor and what makes his work so interesting. The work is direct, yet elusive. The figures are smiling when keeling over. The world is about to explode, so why not party? An ironic wit and an understanding of cultural history is the backstory of this artist whose influences are a product of his generation, as well as folk art and other African American artists who question stereotypes by presenting them unabashedly. - Jody Zellen