

'grinning from ear to ear': The Year of the Wolfbat at Space 1026

Dennis McNett's images of predators and skulls have been visible in the skateboard world for a while now. I have been skateboarding for more than twenty-five years (sigh) and I should like this kind work, but I just can't identify with it. This antipathy becomes pronounced when the images are presented in a gallery setting. When McNett's images are ripped out of the context of skateboard culture, and hung on a gallery wall for purely visual contemplation I am at a loss to find an angle for a critical approach.

It's difficult to address the 'Year of the Wolfbat' in terms of contemporary art due to McNett's seeming lack of interest in the history of avant garde tactics and strategies. Does this body of work profess a working understanding of the Hegelian 'end of art', or the self cannibalizing gestures of Institutional Critique? Absolutely not. In fact it appears to be anti historical and seems to have a following based merely on its ability to reflect the superstructure's belched out manifestations of hipster lifestyles.

Formally, McNett's signature style consists of hard edge woodcuts that are similar to 'jail house' tattoos with their dynamic shading from multiple light sources as if his raptors were flying through a sky that's illuminated by multiple suns. McNett's chisel work is highly mannered, where the marks are of similar lengths and widths. This gives the rendered objects a machine made quality that sacrifices the varied shimmer that can be found in the heterogeneous cutting of the American woodcut artist Leonard Baskin. The feathers of McNett's eagle retain an even grey tone due to the repetitive white line cuts and the relatively even distribution of black shapes and negative spaces. The feathers on Baskin's Crow are more naturalistic and visually interesting due to varied chisel work where one can't immediately see what width tool was used. Baskin's work comes from an historical awareness of the richness of heterogeneous mark making found in the drawings of DaVinci and Rembrandt. McNett is drawing from the relatively younger lineage of 'punk album covers and skate graphics', and it shows in the lack of compelling marks and shapes that could hold one's interest.



Leonard Baskin, Crow

McNett's images function like street signs, where the strong outlines and forms of the shapes indicates what they are, images of predators. The artist uses these animals as allegories for the ethos of the outlaw, the loner who feeds off the weak on the edge of the pack. This imagery makes sense for skateboarders, considering that what initially drew me in was that I could ride by myself, on my own schedule spending countless hours in empty parking lots lost in my own head while learning how to do a kickflip.

Even though I find it difficult to address this work in terms of a serious artistic project, McNett has produced graphics for the skateboard company Antihero, and to me, this gives the work immediate credibility. Antihero is the Hell's Angels of skateboarding, and their boards and logo present a challenge that claims that one must be worthy to use their products. I have never, or will never, ride an Antihero board because I am weak. It is like wearing a red bandana in a Crips neighborhood. Unlike other lifestyle activities such as riding a fixed gear bicycle or a Harley, where all one needs to do is purchase the gear and rock the fashions, with skateboarding, as soon as one pushes or 'drops in' everyone within viewing distance knows if one is for real or not.

The company was founded in the early 90's by the San Francisco based skater Julian Stranger, and

counts within its ranks legends such as Tony Trujillo, Peter Hewitt and John Cardiel. Antihero is known for hard living and heavy skating. Their image has been carefully manicured to project a mystique of the rebel without a cause/anti-authoritarian attitude. McNett's interests are in line with the Antihero image when he states that:

when I see some 60-year old guy on a motorcycle speeding at 90 mph, no helmet, and with a week's worth of filth over his skin grinning from ear to ear or just somebody going for it-or some weird spot someone put together on the side of the road.... I'm attracted to how alive they are and relate to their characters.

The Antihero logo has become sign for the outsider, the marginal, and the pariah. Antihero is an exclusive group of professional skateboarders. This insular team has a public presence in magazines and videos. Their public image has been carefully engineered in their ads that look like ransom notes or the collages of a serial killer, as well as videos that present Nan Golden-like glimpses into a life of drinking, heavy drugs, and living dangerously.

Skateboarding has made its way into mainstream culture with events such as the X-games and Fuel TV. It is used to promote sports drinks, hygiene products and video games. Many professional skateboarders have lost their credibility amongst their peers by collecting endorsement checks from these companies. Antihero's image stands in opposition these alien corporations' acts of co-opting the activity that defines and supports them. It's one



Dennis McNett

marketing campaign against another. McNett's graphics emblazoned across the bottom of skateboard decks are utilized to articulate Antihero's posture of resistance.

Regardless, what is most irksome in McNett's work is the conflation of Norse mythology with skateboarding, and how this ties into the outcast ethos of Antihero's image. McNett states that 'I was really drawn to the Norse folklore because of the rich characters and imagery that is conjured up when reading it ...battles, magic, monsters, giants, gods, [and] adventure.' It's troubling considering how this Teutonic imagery was mobilized in the 30's and 40's, and that these themes could shamelessly be used in art again simply because they are appealing. Historical amnesia, as opposed to barbarism (or at least I hope), enables these messages to consciously or unconsciously be encoded into unreflexive artworks and finding wide dissemination without anybody blinking an eye or making a fuss.

Mired within a 24-7 now-time mentality, where the weight of history is seen as oppressive, it may feel that it is better to ignore these documents of barbarism for the sake of one's own health. Formally and thematically, McNett's work appears to rest in blissful ignorance of the history of the use of these themes. In our current moment of the 'passions', where hate crimes are on the rise, we must question the traces that re-emerge from the debris of the horrors of the past.

When skateboard graphics are utilized for their original intent, McNett's images are as ephemeral as scratch off lottery tickets. As soon as the images are excised from their original context and displayed within the discursive space of an art gallery, the subthemes within the work become visible and hopefully foregrounded. It is left to viewer to decide how to respond to these messages, and the outcome of these exchanges is an indicator of the seriousness of the Philadelphia art community.

-Holly Martins