

Of Muppets and Men: Team Macho at Gitler & _____

BY ANNELIESE COOPER | AUGUST 05, 2015

“There’s a lot of emotional content — like Kermit’s gaze here, looking off into this void of palm fronds and hamburgers,” Team Macho’s Lauchie Reid said, pointing to the cover image for the Canadian collective’s new show at Gitler & _____. “He looks a little lost to us, a little wistful.” It’s true: though his jersey-clad back is to the viewer, the Muppet frog has a notably forlorn slouch to his shoulders. And it’s true too that, despite a preponderance of nostalgia-bait references (fellow collective member Nicholas Aoki cites “lunchbox art” as inspiration), there’s more to the surreal pop mash-ups now decking the walls of the Harlem gallery than Tumblr chic. It’s a stumble through the dreamscape of some mass millennial subconscious — a master clash of cultural tokens and artistic styles, of dick jokes and weird, earnest sentiment.

Team Macho, which also includes Stephen Appleby-Barr and Christopher Buchan, first formed when the foursome met at Sheridan College’s illustration program, before graduating in 2004. (More than half the fun, really, is how any and all goofiness is rendered with highly skilled hands.) A group of “indoor kids,” by Reid’s estimation, they bonded over a desire to subvert the rigid tenets of their field — starting with their moniker, which was “the stupidest name we could think of for what we’re doing.” But the affection for kitschy characters, at least, is genuine: “When we went to art school, that’s what we had as our mutual foundation in visual culture,” Reid said. “We didn’t grow up looking at modernist paintings or anything like that. We grew up with Cobra Commander.”

The G.I. Joe villain may not make an appearance in this particular selection, but another reptilian antagonist, Sir Hiss of Disney’s “Robin Hood,” bares his hypnotic eyes in full neon



Team Macho's "Deal With It" from the "New Work, New Jerseys" series, currently on view at Gitler & _____. (Courtesy Gitler & _____.)

hues. Meanwhile, across the room, Ninja Turtles nemesis Krang reaches out a globby pink tendril to hold hands with Kuato from “Total Recall.” It’s a moment of unexpected connection between two characters trapped in other men’s abdomens — a little gross, a little chuckle-worthy, and, yes, oddly touching.

“We got so used to being shocked with images all the time, to the point where I’m like, ‘I can’t describe this feeling to you, but I can definitely show you a GIF of Sir Hiss,’” Aoki said. “I think it’s just what the ’80s and ’90s did to me, maybe to us and our generation.”

“When we try to reach into ourselves to express some emotion,” Reid added, “it’s easier for us to look at Krang and be like, ‘Oh, Krang, Kuato, lonely men living in stomachs, stomach geniuses—’”

Aoki jumped in: “They’re also ‘The Odd Couple,’ right, because one of them’s inherently good and one of them’s inherently bad—”

“And Craigslist finally brought them together,” Reid pinged back.

That conversational style — overlapping, continually upping the stakes — is a telling window into the group’s artistic practice. As it turns out, each piece in Team Macho’s oeuvre is the product of multiple hands: ideas are reworked, elaborated upon, sometimes drawn over entirely as they trade pieces back and forth — a giant, ongoing game of exquisite corpse, played out across almost 5,000 images created over the past decade.

“When we started off, we all worked around a single table, just like ‘pass to the left, pass to the right, pass across the table,’” Aoki explained. “But that was untenable, because we needed to get jobs. Then, there’d be drawings kicking around [the studio], and you weren’t really sure if they were for the collective or not, so you’d just take them anyways and start working on them, then you’d slide them back and hide them back on the other person’s desk.”

“We started doing this as a way to shirk the idea of illustrators as these lone visionaries, these lone creators,” Reid said. “And we started trying to subvert each other’s drawings — ruin each other’s drawings, basically.” Moreover, he revealed, there’s no editing when it comes to what they put on the gallery wall. What they make is what we see, from a portrait dramatizing the many faces of Canadian prodigal son Drake to the lush landscape of “After Ernie,” through which a lone Bert slouches, carrying a chair and noose. (All the more tragic, Reid pointed out, because as a “pound of felt,” Bert can never truly die.)

“We’re just like, ‘Eh, let’s get together and make mistakes in public,’” he added. “We just put ourselves out there without hiding anything — it’s healthy.”

[of-muppets-and-men-team-macho-at-gitler](#)