

HELLRAISER

Aaron Young imports his distinctly American brand of hard-living artist enthralled by biker culture, delinquency, violence and sex to the quieter precincts of a Brussels gallery



WITH THE HELP OF pit bulls, skateboarders, tattoo artists and helicopter pilots, Aaron Young makes shrewd use of the margins of American pop culture. Whether recreating a colossal Jackson Pollock painting in New York's Seventh Regiment Armory with motorcycles or kicking a video camera to death across Red Square in Moscow, the thirty-seven-year-old New Yorker by way of San Francisco and the Yale MFA programme is embracing an alternative form of American outsider art, aggressively crafting a macho artist persona that attempts to square up to those of the Abstract Expressionists. *ArtReview* shared a beer with the artist among the painted tyre tracks, burned-rubber glass paintings and graffiti-covered plinths at the opening of his show *Semper Idem*, in Almine Rech's newly renovated gallery space in Brussels.

AR This [*Untitled (Arm)*, 2009] doesn't look like any work of yours we've seen before.



AY It's my most explicit, I guess. We took a cast of my arm and the photographed it, brought it into a 3D program and enlarged it to the exact dimensions of the arm of Michelangelo's *David*. I like it because, you know, David was the first underdog. Then there's its hyperchrome finish, and its positioning, coming through the wall, but at crotch level. So, yes, it's my arm, but completely flexed and engorged, with all my blood flowing through it.

AR Is this an idea you've been playing with for a while? Will other pieces follow, or is it a one-off?

AY We'll see. I haven't made up my mind. As with a lot of my work, I play with the ideas, box them up and then install them. I've never been here before, and I didn't know this space was so gigantic. So, like, this piece [*I'm bound to go to heaven because I have already served my time in hell*, 2009] I made after I got here.

AR And how long have you been here?

AY Two days. It's a Hells Angels tattoo and a death's-head ring. And the quote – 'I'm bound to go to heaven because I've already served my time in hell' – is from an original Oakland Hells Angel. I just walked into a bookstore and opened up a Hells Angels book and grabbed this stuff.

AR But you're not really part of biker culture, are you? You've got the coat, I see, but it's not really part of your world, is it?

AY No, no, no. It's just something that is so American, something I'm so obsessed with. It doesn't necessarily have to be biker. It just has to be that same kind of aggression, that same kind of live-by-your-own-terms sensibility.

AR Which you're now exporting to Brussels?

AY Why not, right? We're crossing borders all the time, and exporting, and hypnotising, and propagandising, and what you will.

AR Have you always had a fascination with bad-boy rebellion culture? Is it distanced a bit, or are you right in there living it?

AY I think I've calmed down, but it's something that's kind of bred in you, that you almost have to live up to, you know? There's a lot of kill-your-idols kind of stuff, quotes and text in here, and I think that's more about living up to something, and conquering it. I mean, you know, my father was crazy and all over the place. So you have this

kind of legend that you don't emulate but, just like anything in art, try to expand. You try to push it on to a different direction. I guess I'm right in the middle of it right now. We'll see where it goes.

AR Has it got you into trouble? I mean, having to live up to this persona or this creation?

AY Ah, now you're looking for dirt. I'm sure if you know anything about me, you've probably heard everything there is to tell.

AR OK. Let's talk about the untitled plinths that are in the show.

AY They're riffs on early minimalism, but they're also like the zero exit of that kind of purity. It's like the 'LSD' [plinth], which is supposed to take you out, but actually captures you. Or the 'Go home' or 'Kill your idols', which are just empty shouts [scrawled into the surface of the plinths]. Especially empty with these tyre tracks everywhere. The



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interview by MOONEY

spray paint and painted tyre tracks on the floor [of the exhibition space] are a reference to the Cage/Rauschenberg piece (*Automobile Tire Print*, 1951), where Cage was driving the car and Rauschenberg was painting the tyre and laying down eight-by-ten pieces of paper under it. It was a nice reference to pull everything together. It's different than the motorcycle paintings, which have so much depth and weight. They're about being pushed down into the paint and bringing something up to the surface. The floor painting has an emptiness to it because there's not that weight. It's just all surface. It doesn't pull anything out. Some of the plinths are pedestals that should have something on them. Some are knocked down as well, so they do have an aggression and a rebelliousness to them, and the same kind of bravado that a lot of the action pieces have. They're very much a reference to early minimalism, but trying to pull it to a point where it's more orientated for, like... a *click* [snapping his fingers], you know? Like it's more this kind of monolithic gathering spot.

AR Right, like the city parks we used to hang around in when we were kids. The park plinths never served the function that they were supposed to. They just became these smashed-up things.

AY Yes. I don't like anything to serve its original function.

AR The glass pieces [*Gang Bang*, 2009] are also bike-related, right?

AY Right. I was walking around a motorcycle piece in my studio, giving directions to the person that's burning out on the bike, and the entire time I'm getting hit with hot rubber from the tyre. So picking up on the detail, we made these rubber pieces. The first one that I made was actually in art school at the San Francisco Art Institute, where I stood against the wall and I had the motorcycle rider just kind of move his tyre back and forth, burning out, and all of this hot rubber is going around my body. We made an outline of my body. So I've done one other piece on glass, but I have never done text before. I just thought there was a time to actually say something. Put something down. And I've always liked this statement, 'gang bang'. I mean, it can go from orgy to, you know, kids in LA, two rival gangs. I like the phrase itself because I think that it can kind of just go for anything, and in the end, basically it's just sex and violence, you know? It's like the Hells Angels quote. Art is about everything, you know, life and death. I find the quote ties this work together nicely, and I think it is kind of hopeful.

AR So you're heaven bound?

AY Well, I don't know about that.

Gang Bang, 2009, laminated glass with shredded tyre rubber, vinyl letters and epoxy resin, 213 x 152 cm, edition 10 of 40. Courtesy the artist, Bortolami Gallery, New York, and Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels

Untitled, 2009, concrete, spray paint, foam, 114 x 37 x 37 cm. Courtesy the artist, Bortolami Gallery, New York, and Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels

Semper Idem, 2009 (installation view, Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels, with *Untitled (Arm)*, 2009, right). Courtesy the artist, Bortolami Gallery, New York, and Galerie Almine Rech, Brussels